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HAZEL COMBE;

OR,

THE GOLDEN RULE.



HAZEL COMBE;

OB,

THE GOLDEN RULE.

BY THE

AUTHOR OF "RECOMMENDED TO MERCY."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

SECOND EDITION.

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HAZEL COMBE;

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CHAPTER I.

A MISSING PAGE IN THE FAMILY HISTORY.

MYLES drew his chair still nearer to the fire, and rested his feet—shod in their well-made high-heeled boots—upon the fender's edge.

Aunt Mary, though less luxurious in her habits than her soldier nephew, saw no reason for denying her solid nether limbs a similar support, so, tucking up her best “French merinos” carefully (for, as she justly remarked, a hot fire will pucker up the best of dresses), she unmasked the beauties of her broad black leather boots to her nephew's wondering gaze.

The story which Mrs. Hannum told was a long one—so long, that the twilight crept into the room and the gaslights gleamed outside before the voices ceased; and Uncle Joseph,

looking round, perceived that his nephew was no longer in the room.

Aunt Mary had spoken of the events which I have already recorded in these pages, and had touched as lightly as her rather heavy hand could be expected to do on those portions of her story which necessitated the mention of her sister's name.

At last she came to the account—terrible and fascinating—of her own father's madness, and of the crimes with which it was connected.

Myles never raised his eyes, or moved an inch, whilst his aunt, with that strange love of the horrible which is one of the unexplained qualities of our nature, recalled the gloomy details of bygone sufferings.

"After the attack upon the Colonel, my dear," she said, "your poor grandfather was shut up in the county lunatic asylum for several years. He wasn't, as you may say, out of his mind, only, when anything touched him like that took back his thoughts to what had passed, he grew violent, and so it was thought necessary to keep him under restraint. I used to see him often, and he always knew me, did poor father, and it went to my heart to see him there among the mad people, when on

most subjects he was as reasonable as you or I. Well, at last the doctors said that he was cured. He hadn't shown any signs of violence for a long, long while, and, of course, I was very glad to think that he should go about again like other people. It was a glad day to me when he came out again! I little thought of what would chance in after years, or perhaps—no, I couldn't have been the one to keep him in that dreadful place!—my own father! Could I, now?" And she turned towards Myles for the consolation which an answer in the affirmative would afford her.

"I don't know," said her nephew, gloomily. "Go on—I want to hear the whole."

"The whole isn't pleasant," said poor Aunt Mary, who felt mortified by his tone. "My father, at his own wish, went away to Canada. He was not an old man, and was pretty strong and hearty, so we made up a matter of a hundred pounds for him, and saw him go away. He sailed from Liverpool in a Cunard steam-vessel, and went away quite hearty. I can see him now, waving his hat amongst the second-class passengers, as our boat rowed away, and looking as full of courage as the rest. He wrote to us after he landed—comfortable

letters they were as you would wish to see. You were a little fellow the years your grandfather was shut up ; but it was him you saw one day at Broadlands. You may remember the time, my dear. I didn't even like to talk to you about poor father, so I never spoke of all his letters about bush-clearing and bear-shooting ; so you never heerd talk about your grandfather. And we did right ; he was better to be dead like, and so we all agreed."

She paused ; but Myles making no sign, she soon continued her narrative.

"The years passed on, my dear, and you got to be a man. You was little in the country, and the servants had orders to be cautious how they talked, and, as we all know, everything gets in time to be forgotten. Well, we hadn't heerd for a long, long while of my father—many months—a year, may be, it was—when one night (but, Myles, you must remember that I only heerd this afterwards) a man was seen to watch about the house of Hazel Combe. Your uncle Johnnie saw him. It wasn't very long before he married, and the man, who had a long grey beard and hair, seemed to be a-hiding like. Your uncle saw him once again, which was at his wedding with Miss Bessie—Miss

A MISSING PAGE IN THE FAMILY HISTORY. 5

Bessie Forester as was—and then it seems that nothing more was said or thought about him."

There is no need to follow Aunt Mary in her account of poor Johnnie Fendall's tragical death, and the subsequent arrest of the murderer.

"It was through Sir Matthew's interest and Mr. Santland's exertions," she said, "that the public never knew who it was that had done the deed. The Rector guessed at once that it was poor father, but most people in the country thought he had been dead long years afore, so suspicion never rested upon him. It was enough for justice to be certain it was a lunatic who had killed poor Mr. Fendall, and so the jury found."

"I suppose he is dead now?" asked Myles, in a low voice of concentrated emotion.

"Yes, my dear—six years ago come May. He never got to say quite right again, and never, as I believe, knew that he had killed your uncle. He thought it was your father; for he had but one wish all along—may God forgive him!—and that was, to be revenged upon the Colonel. It was very dreadful, certainly; but if you had but known, Myles, how he loved your mother—the pretty, darling

creature ! I can see her now, with her bright rosy cheeks, smiling and singing like an angel ! And then there came the drink ! Oh, Myles ! while you live, my dear, don't take to drinking. Even if Miss Rosamond looks cold upon you, don't let it drive you to the bottle ! There's more harm comes of it than I can ever tell you. There's more misery in a pint of spirits than in——”

But Myles was anything but in a mood to listen with willing ears to a lecture on temperance extemporised by Mrs. Mary Hannum. His nerves had been terribly excited by the hitherto unknown history to which he had been listening, and his only wish was to escape from her society, and to refresh himself, after the trying and disagreeable hours he had been passing, by a walk through the fresh wintry air, and by the society of more enlivening companions.

“ This is not, as you said, a pleasant story,” he remarked, breaking in with scant ceremony on her highly original remarks on the sin of intoxication, “ anything but a pleasant story, and I almost wish you had kept it to yourself. However, we live to learn ; and if I ever had entertained serious thoughts of the fair Rosamond—which, I assure you, is very far from

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being the case—your agreeable little family anecdotes would have nipped my fancy in the bud."

He did not wait for a reply, but, hastily shaking hands with Aunt Mary, and promising to call at an early hour on the following day, he went out, burthened with a heavy stock of darkened reflections, into the evening air, and slowly pursued his way homewards.

CHAPTER II.

LAURA IN LOVE.

“So it was a handsome young man who flung his arm round your slender waist, and rescued you from the appalling danger into which you were rushing?”

“I was doing anything but rushing,” replied Rosamond, in answer to Colonel Fendall’s sarcastic query. She felt abashed by his laughter and his scrutiny, and endeavoured to parry his attack with smiling repartee. “I assure you that both Myrza and I were subdued out of all inclination to hurry ourselves, while the stranger had nothing to do but to touch the bridle, and we found ourselves what you are pleased to call ‘rescued.’”

“And what was the interesting stranger like?” inquired Rica. “For I suppose he waited to be thanked. And if you venture to protest that you did not look at him, I warn you that I shall not believe a word you say.”

Rosamond had no wish to hide the merits, as far as she could judge of them, of the gentleman to whom she owed (disclaim it as she might) that life, which to young and old, rich and poor, is ever the most precious of earthly boons. She did not deny that she had looked at, and felt proud to own that she had listened to him ; for a secret voice whispered to her that her unknown deliverer was one of whose acquaintance she had no reason to be ashamed.

“ He was tall and slight——” she began.

“ That of course,” interrupted Rica.

“ With light brown hair——”

“ Curling, and with speaking blue eyes. I see the man from here,” put in Myles, provokingly.

“ I won’t say another word if you interrupt me again,” said Rosamond, good-humouredly. “ My hero, if you will call him so, is quite worthy of being described, for, excepting a slight scar, which, after all, is scarcely a disfigurement, he is the handsomest man I ever saw.”

“ A scar upon his right cheek ! Then, by Jove, it must be Elliot ! The man I mentioned to you, Rica. The man who——”

But a look from his sister warned him into silence, and it was Rosamond who exclaimed, eagerly—

“Elliot? Percy Elliot? The man who saved the crew of the ‘Amelia?’ Oh, I was sure that he was brave! He looked like one who has done good and noble deeds.”

She did not see the scornful curl of Colonel Fendall’s lip, nor the meaning glances which passed between the brother and sister, for her whole heart and fancy was at the moment engaged with Percy Elliot—engaged with him as he steered the “Jane” over the foaming breakers; and still more busy as she recalled the few short minutes, as they had seemed to her, when Percy Elliot, walking by her horse’s side, had talked so pleasantly, and with a voice so soft and winning.

When Sir Matthew awoke it was a renewal of Rosamond’s pleasure to repeat her wonderful adventure for his gratification. She drew a low stool to his side, and placing her arm upon the old man’s knee, began her story. She told it very simply, and with the low yet perfectly distinct tone which is so well appreciated by those whose hearing is beginning to fail them.

Sir Matthew was greatly interested by the recital, and the idea of the danger she had run stirred up the deep-lying affection in his heart. Over it a crust of thinner, weaker feeling had begun to form—a feeling born of the amusement which his elder grandchildren afforded him, and the result, too, partly of their pleasant flatteries. But the love which had been the growth of years could not be superseded in a moment ; and, as I said before, Sir Matthew, while listening to Rosamond's account of her great peril, felt how very dear unto him still was Bessie's daughter, and that any evil which might chance to her would bring down his gray hairs in sorrow to the grave.

The next day Rosamond had the satisfaction of finding a still more sympathising auditor in her cousin Laura. Laura was exactly the girl, even if she had not been in love herself, to enter with spirit into the details of an adventure shared by a handsome as well as daring man ; and Rosamond must indeed have been hard to satisfy had she required a greater amount of attention and interest than were manifested on the occasion by the enthusiastic and impulsive Laura de Berny.

“ And when are you to see him again, *ma*

chère?" she inquired; for Laura had no idea of an acquaintance which had begun so prosperously being allowed to expire for want of aliment to sustain it. Rosamond sighed.

"How can I say, dear? Never, perhaps. He did not even tell me his name, or where he lives. So what could I do? It was impossible for me to ask him to come and be thanked by grandpapa; and yet I would have done it, only Myles is so sarcastic, so——"

"*Insupportable. Mais il n'a que ce défaut-là*, as some one—I don't know who—once said. To tell you the truth, my *Rose blanche*, I don't like your cousin Myles. He is not real—he is not true. He is not like my Hortense. Now, I know she does not like the Major. She does not like soldiers—she is as afraid of them, Colonel Fendall says, as the old lady who would not travel in a carriage with a shot-belt. But though she does not like them, she does not sneer and mock at Major Walker when he talks to me, which Colonel Fendall does, and makes me feel so angry and so foolish."

"Poor Laura!" said Rosamond compassionately. "But why do you worry yourself about what Myles says? Major Walker has been in nearly as many battles, I daresay, as Myles,

and he has been wounded, too, which is much better than coming out unharmed, at least I think so."

"Yes; don't you like a man that has been wounded?" cried Laura, eagerly. "It is so very nice. Ah, there he is!" she exclaimed, springing to the window just in time to see the Major's tall form and the edge of his black whiskers, as her stalwart admirer disappeared round the corner of the Square.

Rosamond looked at her little cousin with something very like dismay.

"Laura," she said, in a voice of affected sternness, "I do believe that you are in love again."

For all reply the little French girl burst into tears. It was a new way for her to take an accusation of the kind, and Rosamond's consternation was greatly increased thereby.

"My darling Laura," she said, "my little pet—what does this mean? And Major Walker, too—that great, dull, silent——"

"Oh, please don't," pleaded poor Laura. "You don't know him; if you did you wouldn't say so. He doesn't talk much, *mais il m'aime tant!* Oh, Rosa dear, *je lui ai donné mon cœur, et je l'aimerai toute ma vie.*"

Here was a confession with a vengeance!—with a vengeance, inasmuch as Count de Berny would, as his daughter knew full well, visit heavily upon her head the folly of which she had been guilty.

The same thought was in Rosamond's mind, as she said, half reproachfully—

“My poor Laura! what have you been about? And what will your father say?”

“*Je ne m'en soucie guère,*” replied Laura, shrugging her shoulders with an air of pretty recklessness which rather shocked her cousin. “My father does not love us, and my mother—don't be shocked, Rosa—only cares for her own lovers. I am sick of everything—sick even of poor grandmamma's good-nature, for she is the same to every one, and what I want is to be loved!”

She spoke with passionate earnestness; and Rosamond, who felt in her heart the same longing for exclusive affection, had no longer the wish to chide. So they talked in the gloaming of those two widely-different men, one of whom had already whispered words of love, whilst the other—Ah! Rosamond was not without a hope that she would see the hero of her imagination again; for she had obtained

her grandfather's leave to spend a week with Mr. Santland in his sea-side cottage, and she knew that Percy Elliot did not live far away.

CHAPTER III.

HOPES AND FEARS.

ROSAMOND was painfully struck by the changes which had taken place in the appearance of the Rector since she had last seen him. She was well aware that he had felt her mother's death severely, and now that she was cognizant of the close ties of relationship which had existed between them she could better understand and account for the overwhelming sorrow which had so evidently bowed him to the earth.

It was with considerable perturbation of spirits that Miss Fendall approached the cottage to which the coachman had been directed as the residence of the Rector of Combe Hatton. The house was a very small one, low-roofed and unpretending. It stood at some little distance from the sea, though facing it; and before it was a garden of very limited extent, which Rosamond entered by a small wooden gate. A drooping, leafless, untrained

jessamine, bare of leaves, and dripping with a recent shower, fell over a wooden porch, which seemed rapidly falling to decay ; and there was altogether an air of desolation in the place which harmonised well with the idea formed by Rosamond of the Rector's increased depression of spirits.

Mr. Santland was not at home when she arrived. He had gone out "for a walk on the Downs," the mistress of the house believed ; would the young lady step into the parlour and rest herself till the "gentlemen" returned ?

The gentlemen ! Rosamond almost started at the word. There was no mistake. It was in the plural number. The Rector had a companion in his excursion, and that companion could, she thought, be no other than Percy Elliot.

Nothing could have been easier than to question Mrs. Lambton on the subject. She appeared a very civil and communicative personage, and had not a certain consciousness checked the expression of Rosamond's curiosity she might have discovered with a word the name of the gentleman by whom the Rector's walk was shared. As matters stood, however, she was obliged to content herself with dwell-

ing in imagination on the chances of seeing Mr. Santland return accompanied by the "interesting stranger" whose merits and attractions had, I am sorry to confess, been of late rarely absent from her mind. It was in vain that she accused herself of folly; in vain that she reproached herself with unmaidenly forwardness; in vain that, like the bewildered rider of the "enchanted horse," she sought the secret to arrest his winged flight; the search proved fruitless. Higher and higher did she mount into the realms of fancy, preparing for herself with every ascending yard a heavier fall when she should awaken from her agreeable dream, and find at last the hidden mystery of life's common-place machinery.

The Rector returned alone, and Rosamond was at first so much struck by his changed looks that she forgot her disappointment. She was not always quite at her ease with Mr. Santland. His age had always from a child imposed on her; and of late years, too, he had grown far more grave, and, as Rosamond thought, severe. Then the truth which had so lately been revealed to her made her first meeting an affair of considerable difficulty. Was she, she asked herself, to throw herself

into the old man's arms with all the enthusiasm of a lately recovered grandchild, or should she wait, trembling and agitated, till the aged patriarch, laying his withered hand upon her head, should welcome her as his long-lost treasure, and bless her as the prop and comfort of his declining years?

Rosamond possessed—as the reader has probably discovered—a more than ordinarily vivid imagination, and many a fanciful scene of meeting, trying in the extreme, between herself and the Rector of Combe Hatton, presented itself before her mind's eye during the short interval that elapsed before he ascended the creaking stairs which led to the little sitting-room.

All, however, went off much more smoothly than she had expected, for Mr. Santland, instead of tottering, walked quite composedly into the room. He laid no withered hand upon her head, but kissed her forehead kindly, and though he did not invoke a blessing on her as his staff and stay, he inquired how long she had been there, and, with his usual courtesy, asked after Sir Matthew's health.

It was rather a flat and uninteresting finale, certainly; but on the whole Rosamond was more relieved than sorry, a feeling which was

considerably increased when the Rector reverted to the subject which was evidently uppermost in his thoughts, namely, the wreck of the "Amelia," and the heroism of his new friend Percy Elliot.

"I could not have believed, my dear, if any one had told it me six months ago, that I should ever like a young man of the present day so much; but then, to be sure, Percy is rather different from others. He has had a better, healthier rearing. I wish that you could see him; but he spoke to-day of a necessity for going to town, and remaining several weeks away."

Rosamond's heart sunk within her, but she contrived to say, with tolerable composure,

"I believe I have had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Elliot. I think—nay, I am sure, that I already know him, sir.

She always had addressed the Rector in that somewhat ceremonious fashion; her mother had instructed her that it was a fitting mark of respect from youth to age, and *he* made no objection to the continuance of the custom. It might be that a term of courtesy so distant was viewed by Santland as a blind to veil the truth, and Rosamond blushed to think that there was

a secret from the world between that aged clergyman and her.

"I am certain that I am acquainted with Mr. Elliot."

"When?" and "how?" were, of course, the prompt inquiries which followed on this interesting piece of information.

And then Rosamond told him the story (she had hitherto concealed it, from the fear of exciting his alarm) of her famous adventure; of her hair-breadth escape, and of Elliot's providential interference.

"I must go and thank him," was the Rector's sole remark, after listening in silence to a recital which filled him with mingled sensations of terror and gratitude.

Rosamond had no objection to make to the Rector's suggestion which was to the effect that she should accompany him on his visit to Percy Elliot, and be a witness to Santland's cordial acknowledgments of the great service rendered by his new acquaintance; and there was a distressing restlessness in the Rector's manner which could not fail to strike his visitor, but which added to the readiness with which she prepared for the expedition.

On the way—it was half an hour's walk to

Elliot's cottage residence—Santland gave Rosamond a slight sketch of his young friend's history, and with that sketch came the information that years before, and when Percy was yet a little child, his father—a soldier as it may be called of fortune—was not wholly unknown to the man who saw so much to admire and respect in his young, and, to his thinking, his chivalrous friend.

CHAPTER IV.

UP-HILL WORK.

“MANY years ago, my dear,” began the Rector, “I lived in what is called the world—not the world of fashion, as you will believe; for even had I been born to the thraldom, it would scarcely have suited me to be the slave of the only known oligarchy which has never been either weakened by faction, or put down by the perilous remedy of a revolution.

“I am not going to speak lengthily about myself, albeit you may have heard from your dear mother that in the universe of letters I was not wholly unknown to fame. My acquaintance, too, among literary men was extensive, and the habits of my life admitted of my combining pleasure with study.

“One evening—I was alone in my London lodgings, busily arranging various papers for a magazine of which I was the editor—there came a quiet knock at my door, the which sum-

mons, as I had given orders to be denied to visitors, surprised me not a little. However, I said the magic words ‘Come in,’ and a gentleman who was an entire stranger stood before me. He was a young man, tall, and with an erect and military bearing, and he opened his business with me at once. He told me he was in the army—a captain, I think he said, of artillery—and that he had married imprudently. There was nothing very remarkable in this exordium, and I waited rather impatiently till he should come to the point. My suspense was soon put an end to, for my visitor, whose name, as he had already informed me, was Elliot, confided to me, without a blush, or even a falter in his voice, that he was an author, and that he had come (trusting to my known kindness) to see me, and that with the hope that I would assist him with advice, and forward his wishes with my credit.

“‘Nothing,’ he said, ‘but the sternest necessity could have compelled me to such a course. I am not a literary man; I know nothing of books and book-making; but I have a wife and two children to support upon my pay, so——’”

“‘You broke ground in a three-volume,’ I suggested commiseratingly.

“‘ Not exactly,’ he replied, with a conscious blush, ‘ I have tried my hand at a sporting tour —quite a trifling affair—but Ellen—Mrs. Elliot, I mean—declares that it reads well, and so I hope it may succeed.’

“ This was certainly encouraging testimony ; nevertheless, I felt bound in common humanity to check his sanguine hopes.

“‘ My dear sir,’ I said, ‘ believe me, it is only in books that young authors rise to celebrity by a *coup de plume*—only in books that large families are adequately, nay, brilliantly supported by the voluntary contributions of an intellectual father’s prolific brain—only in books that——’

“ But the poor fellow looked so miserable that I could not summon sufficient courage for the cruel mercy I had meditated ; so, instead, I inquired of him in a tone of greater encouragement, whether he happened to own anything in the shape of a literary sponsor—any young nobleman of letters, I suggested, with whom he could claim friendship, would be invaluable at the present juncture.

“ The military scribbler shook his head dolefully—so dolefully that I begged he would bring me the ‘ Rod and the River ’ (which was the

name of his MS.) in order that I might form an opinion on its merits.

"In due time the closely-written sheets arrived, and I looked over them attentively.

"There was not much originality or cleverness traceable in the literary effort of my new acquaintance, and again I felt called upon by a sense of duty to break the melancholy fact to the disappointed author.

"A less sanguine or impoverished man than Elliot would have been quelled by the unqualified opinion which I gave of his production; but the effect of that opinion was, in his case, to induce him to draw forth from his pocket a few sheets of another MS., which he also submitted to my criticism.

"It was a military 'mistake' this time; reminiscences, as it appeared to me, of his father's warlike career (the old gentleman had died a neglected general), and his son had clearly inherited his parent's bitter feelings towards an ungrateful country.

"'Pay and Perquisites' was evidently a dangerous emanation, for 'chawing up' was the order of the day in the soldier's diary. Everything was to be put to rights—privates who had been under fire were better adapted for field-

marshals than princes who had stayed at home at ease ; those in authority were condemned as incompetent or venial ; and the wrongs of the British soldier were everywhere protruded. In short, nothing would satisfy the indignant writer but an entire cleansing away of all traces of corruption, and then—oh, happy millennium !—the minnows were to hold their own with the Tritons, the tomtit with the vulture, and captains of artillery would at last be even with the generals who now looked down upon them as nought.

“ ‘ This will never do,’ I said ; and, to do him justice, the author seemed to be of my opinion. However, to make my story short, poor Elliot did at last submit something printable for my inspection. It was scarcely more than a child’s book—a collection of stories from the German of an almost unknown writer—but Elliot had thought of his little children as he wrote the words, and paternal affection had inspired his pen with eloquence.

“ I was overjoyed to find something to praise at last, and still more delighted to find that my favourable judgment was shared by the publisher, who, at my recommendation, consented to undertake the work. The sum stipulated for as

payment was not considerable, but it would relieve poor Elliot from some pressing difficulties, and he closed the bargain gladly and gratefully.

“ Pending the publication of the ‘Tales about Kings,’ I saw a good deal of Percy’s father. He was of an affectionate and clinging nature—one of the few really amiable men whom in life I have chanced to meet with. His disposition, too, was communicative, and I was soon put *au fait* of his private history. There was an elder brother to be mildly complained of—an elder brother who, not content with monopolising far more than the lion’s share of the paternal property, saw fit to lecture his indigent younger brother on the sins of extravagance and ingratitude. Extravagance, inasmuch as the poor soldier had taken to himself a penniless wife ; and ingratitude, because, forsooth, the unhappy man ventured sometimes to arraign the justice of a will by which one brother was raised to affluence, and the other cut off with a shilling.

“I bestowed a large amount of sympathy upon the ill-used Captain, the while I mused within myself on the folly of the exacting elder brother, who could expect ‘ nice conduct from

such a clouded Cain,' or gratitude from a branch of the family tree over which were brooding the vultures of envy, poverty, and discontent.

"At last the day arrived when his little book was launched upon the waves of literature. Elliot was to receive the long-looked-for reward of his exertions. In wild elation of spirits he bent his steps to the publisher's abode; in another moment a sum of money—of money spun from his own brain—would be placed within his hands, and then——But his joyful meditations were speedily and painfully cut short; for on inquiry for Mr. —— he was told, with an abruptness which nearly caused him to fall senseless on the pavement, that the firm of —— and —— had suspended payment!"

"How very sad!" cried Rosamond, who had been listening in mute eagerness to the Rector's story.

"Sad indeed—and far sadder than you, or any of those fortunate ones who have never had to struggle with that bitter adversary Want, can ever realise! To see the dear ones, whom we cherish with a love rendered stronger by their weakness and dependence—to see them, I say, looking to us for comforts—ay, almost for

necessaries, which we strive in vain to procure for them, is a cruel trial, and who can count its sum of bitterness? Through many a weary day, and far into many a still wearier night, had Percy Elliot's brave, unselfish father worked his willing brain. His hands had trembled as they wielded that mighty instrument of little men, but his hold had not relaxed. His brain had reeled beneath the pressure put upon it, but the proud heart rose with stern necessity, and the courageous independent spirit which could not stoop to ask for aid, upheld him to the end—the end where Hope stood beckoning him onward, and where he dimly saw a recompense for all his toil. He told me—afterwards, and when habit had made him grow accustomed to the cruel reality—that the intelligence of his heavy losses crushed him down at first with a violence from which it seemed impossible that he could ever rise again. He walked back to his miserable lodgings like one wandering in a dream; and when he told his wife—ah, that seemed the hardest part of all his lot—instead of pitying, she overwhelmed him with reproaches.

“ ‘It was not her fault, poor dear,’ he said to me one day; ‘she was ill and weak, and had

been looking forward to so many little comforts.'

"Oh, the unselfish, unrepining generosity of that noble-hearted man ! His wife—she was the daughter of a musical composer—had never been worthy of him. Her personal beauty was considerable, or rather, must have been before disappointment produced peevishness, and peevishness the premature lines which disfigured her still almost girlish face. Elliot had seen and admired her when he was quartered at a garrison seaport town ; and when she, though scarcely seventeen, was the beauty followed and talked of by the military philanderers, whose attentions had gone far towards turning one of the silliest little heads in the world. To marry an officer, to be visited by ladies and gentlemen, and to follow her husband from barrack to barrack, and from camp to camp, was, I suppose, this young woman's idea of Paradise. Elliot was then, as he often told me, the veriest fool that was ever rendered fit for an idiot's hospital by the meaningless magic of a woman's smile. He was not proof, no, not for an hour, against the wiles of even an inexperienced, nature-taught garrison coquette like Percy's mother ; and the result was, as I have told you,

harder work than he had strength for on his part, discontent and reproaches on *hers*—to say nothing of the two incumbrances in the shape of hostages to fortune by whom poor Elliot's wretched lodging was daily and nightly filled with noise, confusion, and discomfort.

“ Poor fellow ! I hardly think that, save for his wife's interminable complaints and reproaches he would ever have put pen to paper again. But Mrs. Elliot's sarcasms were so keen, and her complaints of privations so piteous, that the unfortunate husband, goaded to desperation, began to turn his thoughts once more towards the obtaining extra means for the support of his craving wife and family. Meanwhile there was no comfort for him in his dismal home—where his time was passed in listening to Mrs. Elliot's vituperative remarks on the unlucky firm, whose failure had caused their disappointment.

“ ‘For,’ as she was for ever repeating, ‘they had been *done* out of their own property, and had been defrauded of the money which was so sorely, sorely-needed to buy food and clothes for the darling children. She said nothing about herself—not she ; though it was two years since she had had a new silk dress, and she was

ashamed—that she was—to show her face in the old thing which she was forced to wear.'

" Well, my dear, as I was saying, except for the printer's bill, and his tiresome wife's complaints, I doubt whether Elliot would ever have put pen to paper again. But necessity drives a man to many an act which, except under such stern pressure, he would shrink from ; and thus, though Elliot's health was failing, and his medical adviser expressly prescribed for him entire rest of mind and thought, he set to work again, and in three months more another volume of ' Tales ' was ready for the press.

" What he endured during those months is only to be guessed by those who have been forced to draw upon an exhausted imagination for the number of words required to produce means with which to purchase the necessaries of life. The work was not without its merit, for Elliot was to some extent an original thinker ; and the striking of the rock from which flowed the stream of words was an affair now of habit, and effected as it were by machinery. But, readable although it was, Elliot's book bore, as might have been expected, considerable traces of the haste with which it had been written, and of course kindness towards

its merits and blindness to its faults were not to be expected from the reviewers. Most unfortunately, Mrs. Elliot read all the mortifying comments which were the recompense of her husband's soul-wearying, heart-breaking exertions ; and her paraphrases thereon were perhaps among poor Elliot's sorest punishments for his folly. After all that he had done—after all his untiring mental exertions—after the sleepless nights, and days divided between the discharge of his professional duties and the unrelaxing call upon a brain filled with anxious care and thought—it was not a little hard to be taunted with incapacity, with wrong-doing, and, strange as it may seem, with a selfish indulgence of vanity, by the very person for whom the ill-fated man had so lavishly expended his health and strength, and the faculties which had been bestowed upon him. And he, too, felt, with all the torture of a sensitive mind, the unexpected attacks which were made upon him ; and I was truly glad, for my poor friend's sake, when an order for foreign service arrived, and Elliot, cleared of pressing debt by the proceeds of his last literary effort, sailed with his wife and one child to India.

“ Years passed away, and death, fortunately

for them, made havoc with the helpless ones left behind by Elliot when he bade farewell to England, and soon only Percy remained of the three children, who had contributed by their noisy voices to make a pandemonium of the Chatham lodging.

"I can tell you little more of the man, who, being 'too poor for a bribe, and too proud to importune, had not the method of making a fortune.' All I ever heard afterwards of poor Elliot and his family was, that he eventually fell a victim to the Indian climate, and that his widow is now living on her pension in the north of England. Percy has been, I fancy, in the navy, though to what rank he rose I know not, and the relation with whom he is now staying is a decrepid sister of his mother's—a retired governess, who having met with an accident during the conscientious discharge of her duty—an accident which deprived her of the use of her limbs—has since been in the receipt of a pension of one hundred pounds a-year, secured to her by the parents of the 'young charges,' the care of whom had drawn down upon her so signal a calamity. Miss Jefferson is foolish rather beyond the average, but still it is a refreshing sight, that of the patient aunt and her young

nephew—she so proud of her handsome, spirited young relation, and he attending to her comfort, and waiting on her as though he were a son of her own. When I want to be put in a better humour with human nature in its purely domestic form, I pay a visit to Tamarisk Cottage, where poor helpless Miss Jefferson is lodged and boarded for some sixty pounds per annum. From those visits I invariably return with the conviction, that many and valuable as are the lessons to be learnt from the strangers whom we meet on life's *highway*, there are purer, higher, better examples for our following amongst the humble unknown beings, who, in *by-paths* and unfrequented ways, support their daily cross uncheered by hope, and uncomforted by that choicest blessing—the love and sympathy of their kind."

By this time Rosamond and her companion had arrived at the door of Miss Jefferson's humble lodging, which proved to be, as the Rector had implied, one of the least imposing kind fitted, as the common saying is, for "gentlefolks." There was no knocker at the door, and Mr. Santland made his presence known by rapping with his fingers.

Rosamond stood by his side half wondering

at the situation in which she found herself. To be waiting there—outside the house where lived the man whose image had filled her thoughts for weeks! And it was such a house! So utterly out of keeping with all the associations of her youth—so different from Hazel Combe! It seemed scarcely possible that she could have been allowing the inhabitant of such a dwelling to supply a place either in her fancy or her heart!

We are all such miserable slaves to appearances—such victims to the *qu'en dirait-on?*—that Rosamond Fendall, good girl, and honest-hearted as Nature in her beneficence had made her, was, and I say it to her shame, chilled by the sight of that third-class dwelling; and Percy Elliot, far from being a hero, almost ceased to be a gentleman in her sight. Twice had the Rector knocked, and then a window was raised on the first floor, and a man's head protruded from the aperture.

"Ha!" exclaimed a voice, which at once caused the visitors to look up. "Ha! I beg your pardon. I am taking care of the house. In a moment I will be with you."

And true to his word, before many seconds had elapsed, Percy Elliot had opened the door,

and was shaking hands most cordially with both.

There was not the slightest embarrassment in his manner, nor the smallest evidence of shame at the *mesquin* appearance of his abode. Rosamond felt this, and a sensation of shame at her own unworthiness crept over her, and lent a painful consciousness to her manner.

Percy did not appear to notice either her blush, or the kind of nervous hesitation with which she accepted his proffered hand. He was occupied entirely by his own exceeding pleasure at seeing that sweet girlish face once more; and when he piloted them up the narrow winding stairs which led to his aunt's only sitting room, the shabbiness of the carpet did not occupy him for a moment, nor did one humbling reflection on the lowliness of his surroundings damp the delight with which he welcomed Rosamond to the cottage.

"Aunt Agatha," he said, going up to her sofa with Rosamond's hand in his, "I have brought you a visitor—a visitor of whom you have heard me speak. Miss Fendall, my aunt knows all about Myrza's indiscretions. I have made her hair stand on end regularly every morning since our adventure, and I shall not be the least

surprised if she calls upon you for a repetition of the anecdote."

Miss Jefferson put out a white thin hand to her young guest, and welcomed her kindly.

" You must not be surprised, Miss Fendall," she said, in a voice which Rosamond thought singularly soft and agreeable, " if I greet you as an old acquaintance. Percy and I have not many excitements to vary the routine of our existence, and, as you may suppose, he indulged my curiosity to its fullest extent when it was a question of Miss Fendall's danger—her courage, and her escape."

There was a slight tone of flattery in this which rather annoyed Rosamond, and it was evident that Percy, attached and attentive as he was to his maiden aunt, felt the want of tact displayed in her remark. It passed off unnoticed however in the Rector's flow of thanks, and kindly expressions towards Rosamond's deliverer.

" And why was I, who am so much interested in this young lady's safety, the last to hear of the danger from which she then escaped? " asked Mr. Santland.

Percy explained. " He had discovered," he said, " that the lady to whom he had been so

fortunate as to render a slight service, was the Miss Rosamond Fendall of whom Mr. Santland so often spoke, and as it was evident from the Rector's silence on the subject that he was ignorant of what had occurred, he and his aunt agreed that the question of Miss Fendall's escape had best be avoided during Mr. Santland's visits.

During this explanation Rosamond was improving her acquaintance with the invalid, whose patient face and gentle manner at once enlisted her sympathy in the sick woman's behalf; and before the conversation between the Rector and Percy Elliott was half over, her young visitor had promised to call frequently on Percy Elliot's aunt, and help to enliven a solitude which was borne with so exemplary an amount of resignation.

CHAPTER V.

LAURA'S BANISHMENT.

"I HAVE had the most amusing letter from Myles to-day," said Rosamond to the Rector. She had been his contented guest for a fortnight, and was walking with him and Percy (who since her arrival had been her constant attendant) on the sea beach. "Such an amusing letter! He is such good fun about Laura—poor darling Laura, and her Major! Mr. Elliot, some day when Laura is Mrs. Walker, which I am certain that she will be, you must make acquaintance with her, and you will then see a perfect specimen of a true and genuine female hero-worshipper."

"Major Walker is in the Twenty-third Dragoons—is he not?" asked Elliot.

"Yes; a tall, handsome, heavy, regular dragoon—*brave comme son épée*, as Laura says. She hardly reaches to his elbow, and looks up to him as a demi-god."

“Poor little girl!” said the Rector, “By your account, she has allowed sound to triumph over sense, and the gallant Major has to make amends by length of limb for emptiness of head. Women may sometimes be contented with little here below, but they ‘want that little *long*,’” he added, with a laugh.

“I will read you a small portion of my letter,” said Rosamond, not noticing the remark, for she was full of her little cousin’s love-affair. “He says, ‘Our Laura is in a scrape! You must know that the Count—I can see it all with half an eye—wants her to marry your humble servant. Nothing can convince him—how the idea will make you laugh—that I am not to inherit Hazel Combe, and it follows, as a necessary consequence, that he looks upon Laura’s ponderous plunger with jaundiced eyes. *C'est un père prodigue*, as I tell *la mignonne*, who has devoured his daughters’ living in a way unbecoming those daughters’ ears to hear.’”

“I wonder what he has done?” said Rosamond innocently, and interrupting the reading of her letter to look round for information, which neither of her auditors were disposed to afford. “Gambled, I suppose, or some

dreadful thing like that. But I shall go on, if it does not bore you. Does it, sir?" to Sant-land.

The Rector shook his head, and she continued.

"Poor little Laura's affair is evidently progressing, and the Major is growing quite lively under the influence of the tender passion. The Count watches this poor little mouse like a great whiskered tom-cat as he is. But yesterday he went unexpectedly to London, and being away, the mouse, according to the old proverb, did play, and play to good purpose, too, as you will see. Dancing with the Major is, as you probably know, a luxury forbidden to *la pauvre petite*; but it chanced that, whilst the band was playing yesterday on the cliff, an empty house—a house to let, with bills at the windows—caught the eye of the fortunate dragoon. In a moment, and with a celerity of ideas scarcely, under ordinary circumstances, to be expected of him, the Major's plans were formed, matured, and acted on. Combination would appear to be his *forte*, for ten minutes afterwards half-a-dozen couples of determined polkists had made an inroad into the empty house, the band struck up the *Schottische*, and

Laura was being whirled about at the rate of fifteen miles an hour by the six-feet high hero of her affections. Waltz succeeded to waltz, and polka to polka, and the fun threatened to become, like Lady T——, both fast and furious, when De Berny—warned, I suppose, by some atrocious parental instinct—made an unlooked-for and unwelcome appearance at the door of the improvised ball-room! I shall neither attempt to describe the general consternation, nor that of Laura in particular. The result of the Count's unprincipled return by an earlier train than was expected has been the immediate removal of the love-sick Laura to London. She is to be consigned to the custody of that time-worn beauty, old Cousin Barbara, who, having sown her wild oats thirty years ago, is admirably calculated for a duenna; and, as a matter of course, the next news we hear will be that Mademoiselle Laura de Berny has bolted with the Major, and become an appendage of the Twenty-third Regiment of Dragoons.'

"And I am sure I hope she will," said Rosamond, energetically. "She will escape from tyranny—she will be the wife of a brave man; and, although they may not be rich, she will have the happiness of knowing that her

husband's name is honoured as a gallant soldier who has shed his blood in the service of his country."

"Very romantic and very pretty, my dear," said the Rector; "but, unfortunately people cannot live upon laurels, and Monsieur de Berny, in his opposition to this interesting flirtation, may have had some reason on his side. I have little doubt, however, of Miss Laura's eventually gaining her point. A fool with one concentrated fancy has always a far better chance than a clever person who possesses a hundred diluted ideas, of not one of which he makes a fixed and especial use. Nor can I pity a father whose tyranny has taught his children the vice of deception."

"Did you ever know my cousin Myles?" asked Rosamond, rather abruptly, of Percy.

He hesitated before he replied, and then said—

"Very slightly. Colonel Fendall did not court the acquaintance of poor men; whilst I—but I am forgetting. I promised my aunt that I would return at five, and I must wish you good-by. To-morrow, at the usual hour, is it not?" And receiving an answer in the affirmative, he took his leave.

"Does your cousin say anything of Sir Matthew's health?" asked the Rector, when he found himself alone with Rosamond.

"Yes; he says, at the end of his letter, that my grandfather never was better."

"Then, take my word for it, Rosamond, that he is not well, and that your place is, just now, at home. I have, as you know, no faith either in Myles or his sister. I believe that for them the word 'money' is written in letters of fire on the walls around them, and on the floor beneath their feet. I believe that envy of your future fortunes is always fomenting within them; and it is a baneful and a loathsome passion, child. Like the germs of a fatal pestilence which lie hidden in a bale of merchandise till chance, in the shape of light and air, enables them to lay waste a city, even so does envy lurk in evil hearts, unknown, often, and unsuspected by those who are destined to be its victims. There is a command, my dear, in the sacred volume—or rather a piece of advice—which it has always appeared to me almost impossible to follow. I mean that which enjoins us to unite the wisdom of the serpent with the harmlessness of the dove. If you happen to possess the secret of amalgamating these two antagonistic

qualities, you may circumvent your cousins' plots against you; but, under any other circumstances, perhaps you would do wisely to succumb at once, and with silent dignity, to your fate."

CHAPTER VI.

SELF-RESTRAINT.

ON the evening of that day Mr. Santland complained, and it was with him a very unusual occurrence, of indisposition. Mrs. Lambton, who was a nurse by taste as well as by profession, pronounced his coming disorder to be neither more nor less than a bad cold, and prescribed accordingly. But in spite of treacle posset and a warm bed, the cold increased ; so that on the following day the Rector found himself compelled to remain within doors.

There was no necessity for Rosamond's sharing in his imprisonment. It was "only a cold," and walking was advisable for Miss Fendall's health ; so when Percy Elliot called at the customary hour of two, they sallied forth together.

Along the sea-shore they took their way, and for a time almost in silence, for those fourteen days of constant intercourse had done far more

than strengthen the liking to which their first romantic encounter had given birth. It was by Rosamond that the conversation was first effectually begun, for it was by her that the greater amount of that species of consciousness which leads to taciturnity was felt. The embarrassment of the situation oppressed her, and she said, without giving much heed to the words she used,

“ How much Miss Jefferson must miss you when you leave her! But then you go to your mother—to her sister, do you not? Would it not be a happier arrangement for both if they lived nearer to each other? they could share you between them better then.”

“ I am not going to Rydal,” answered Percy, “ at least not just yet. I have my profession to follow, or rather,” he added with some bitterness, “ I should say, my trade.”

“ Your trade?” repeated Rosamond, who was too much taken by surprise to be scrupulously polite.

“ Yes—I have had a longer holiday than usual in consequence of the illness of one of my pupils. I prepare young gentlemen for the army and navy. I am very poor, as you may have heard, and perhaps I ought to have told

you that I am hardly in the position of what the world calls a gentleman."

It cannot be denied that this speech of Percy Elliot's—of the Percy whose innate refinement of manner and whose chivalrous tone of feeling had assigned him a high social place in her estimation—was felt as a blow both to Rosamond's heart and to her pride; but happily before the pause she made was long enough to excite the attention of her sensitive companion, higher and more worthy feelings obtained the ascendent, and she said in a low tone—

"I am no judge of the world's opinion regarding the importance of the several Professions. To impart instruction one must be learned, and I, for one, should dearly love to possess a store of information sufficient both for myself and others."

"You take a flattering view of the matter," rejoined Percy, "but my experience tells me that it is a far from common one. *Why* the world looks down upon, and treats as *dependents*, we poor tutors, and the equally aggrieved teachers of the other sex, I know not, but so it is, and I have always felt it to be a little hard. But, dear Miss Fendall, the world has grown too old, while making such mistakes as these,

for it to acknowledge or repent its error now ; and we its victims would do better to suffer and be silent."

Rosamond's next question was about Percy's mother.

" Is she at all like dear Miss Jefferson ? " she said. " I fancy that she must be. She has of necessity also endured so many trials ; and yet I cannot pity her so much as I do your aunt, for Mrs. Elliot has had her sum of enjoyment. She married a husband who loved her. A gallant soldier too, who worked for her and for her children, while poor Miss Jefferson has neither a happy past to look back to, nor a cheerful future to hope for. It is wonderful to me that poverty, confinement, and old maidism have never made her either uncharitable or cross. I feel that I could dearly love Aunt Agatha, and I grieve to think how improbable it is that we shall ever meet again."

She looked up to Percy's face as she spoke, and there she encountered an expression which caused her eyelids to droop, and sent the crimson flood betrayingly to her cheek. It was an expression which said as plainly as words could have declared the truth that Rosamond was loved by the man who walked beside her—in

silence now—for well he knew that he had laid bare the secret which he had almost sworn unto himself to guard.

And she—she who had by her unguarded speech elicited the mute avowal, what were her sensations whilst that short but speaking silence lasted? Rosamond, it must be remembered, was very young. Young both in years and experience, so it is scarcely surprising that her first sensation was one of unmitigated shame. Shame at her thoughtless expressions of regret at leaving *his* relation—expressions of regret which she little doubted had been the cause of that searching and much meaning glance. For, pure and innocent although she was, Rosamond had read in Percy's eyes the eloquent words of passion—of passion heart-stirring and irrepressible, which like a strain of sweet and hitherto undreamt-of music found an answering though fainter echo in her own love-seeking breast.

Meanwhile, the effect of that sudden blush, and of those conscious, cast-down eyes, was the throwing down, for the moment at least, of the barriers which Percy Elliot had rapidly thrown up between his duty and his inclinations. He had told himself from the first that the dwelling upon any hopes connecting his future with that

of Rosamond Fendall, was an act little short of madness ; but, despite his vigorously exerted mental courage he was but human, and it was not in the nature of his five and twenty summers to be always obedient to the voice of Prudence when she bade him banish that bright, sweet creature from his thoughts, and concentrate them on what poor Percy called his “trade.”

“ And she will never know,” he argued to himself, “ what she has been and ever will be to the man who for these few blessed weeks has sunned himself in her frank joyous smiles. It is as the desire of the moth for the star—a desire unsuspected by the bright object of a mad idolatry ; and in after years, if she ever recurs in fancy to these days which have been to me as an oasis in the desert of my life, there will be mixed with her memory of him who silently adored her, no alloy of either bitterness or scorn.”

In some such words as these did Percy Elliot, who had not yet passed the age of romance, embody the feelings which Rosamond’s beauty and her gentle grace had excited in his heart. At that moment too—when he was, as it were, alone with her on that solitary strand, with the

monotonous roll of the ocean on the pebbly beach attuning the minds of both to a kind of tender melancholy—the passion which surged within him made wild havoc in his breast, and threatened, as I have said, to lay all waste before its unchecked violence.

But Elliot, though deeply in love, and encouraged—as many a vainer man might have deemed himself to be, by Rosamond's words as well as by the blush which still lingered on her cheek—had yet the tact and delicacy to see in that very encouragement—so evidently unintended—a reason for self-restraint. It required but a few minutes for him to obtain the mastery over himself, and then he said, in a voice which struck Rosamond as constrained—

“ My poor aunt will be greatly gratified and flattered when I tell her of your kind remembrance. She is indeed all you say; a narrow income has not closed her heart, and I of all who know her have the best right, if even in common gratitude, to sound her praises—for I fear she may have often bored you with her everlastingly sounding trumpet on the theme of my imaginary merits.”

“ It must be very pleasant to be so dearly loved,” began Rosamond, and then stopped

abruptly, from a feeling that she had again been guilty of a mistake.

But she was safe from any misconstruction on the part of her chivalrous-minded companion, who but saw in her words the natural impulse of an affectionate and sympathy-loving disposition.

"Poor Aunt Agatha!" he said; "she will miss your visits. You have been very kind in calling on her so often, and your compassion has been of infinite service to her; she needs it however—desolate though you may consider her lot—infinitely less than my poor mother. For *she* has enjoyed blessings only to be deprived of them, and besides she is not blessed with good Aunt Agatha's quiet, unrepining nature. My mother dwells regretfully on the past, especially in—but I am boring you with my domestic grievances."

"Oh, no!" interrupted Rosamond eagerly. "Pray tell me about your mother, for her sorrows must be yours, and I know that it is some comfort to dwell upon our griefs with those we love—and—and," she added, with another conscious blush, "I felt it to be so when my poor mother died, and Laura and Hortense let me talk for hours to them of my grief."

"You are young to have known sorrow," said Percy, almost with a gasp; for at that moment the longing to pour out his heart to her, and entreat her to take comfort from his deep devotion, was stronger than ever within him.

"I am nearly eighteen," said Rosamond simply; "and many have suffered at a far earlier age than mine. Was Mrs. Elliot very young when her life's troubles began?"

"She was scarcely five-and-twenty when she left India a mourning widow, and with one precious little girl, who died on the passage home. I do not think my mother ever recovered the loss of that tiny treasure. She cannot to this day endure to speak of her little Sybil. Of the others who have been spared the shocks and buffetings of the world she often talks to me, her only remaining child. But the little daughter who lies buried beneath the waves of the Atlantic, is, and ever has been, a forbidden subject between us."

They were now at some distance from the farthest house, and as the silence and the solitude grew deeper around them, Rosamond proposed returning, alleging her uncle's indisposition as her excuse.

A heavy sigh—one which he would have given much to suppress—broke from Percy's lips as they moved homewards, and during the remainder of the walk a silence broken only by occasional and totally irrelevant remarks reigned between the two, whose thoughts, could they but have been imparted, would have been so deeply interesting to each other.

CHAPTER VII.

IMPRUDENCE.

FOR three days—that is to say, during the time that Mr. Santland's illness lasted—Rosamond and Percy Elliot abstained, by a tacit though mutual consent, from a repetition of their *tête-à-tête* walks along the beach. It was a self-denial praiseworthy to both, but especially to the latter, who reaped his due reward in a manner which I am shortly about to reveal.

The moment that the Rector felt himself sufficiently recovered to undertake the short journey to Brighton, he announced his intention of paying his old friend Sir Matthew a visit.

“I do not expect to gain much by the investigation, my dear,” was his remark to Rosamond, when she endeavoured to dissuade him from the exertion. “I am an old man now, and my powers of insight, although I fear not those of foresight, are failing me. Our adversaries, too, are in possession of a far larger arsenal of arms,

both great and small, than we can boast of—Colonel Myles being, in my opinion, a man for whom all duties are as old-world prejudices, and by whom every scruple of what I consider honour is regarded as a contemptible weakness."

It was with this conviction on his mind, that the Rector stepped into the hired carriage which in process of time conveyed him to his destination, and set him down, chilled, dispirited, and wearied, at his old friend's door.

"In a couple of hours you can come for me again," had been his parting injunction to the driver, and then, preceded by a tall, well-powdered footman, with massive calves and half insolent demeanour, who had been introduced by Colonel Fendall's influence into the primitive establishment, he ascended the broad stone staircase to the drawing-room.

The sun, which shone full upon the windows, was carefully excluded by the lowered Venetian blinds, and coming, as the Rector did, from the full glare of day, his eyes could not at first discern who were the occupiers of the room. At last, and with considerable difficulty, he made out the master of the house reclining on an easy-chair; and with Frederica Fendall — it

was her favourite place—seated close beside him.

On hearing the Rector's name announced, she whispered a few words in the old man's ear, and he, half raising himself, and, as Mr. Sant-land thought, with difficulty, extended two fingers of an apparently most unwilling hand to his old friend—the friend of more than half a century, who during his own life of weak resolves and well-intended but often profitless action, had never failed to give him wise and useful counsel.

Many had been the Rector's fears for Bessie's daughter, as he thought of the overweening influence exercised by those scheming ones over the mind of that easily-led old man; but he had never feared for himself—never imagined that the habits and affections of years could in so short a time be effectually tampered with; and even now, as he drew a chair towards Sir Matthew, and began a conversation of which he seemed likely to bear almost the entire burthen, it did not occur to him that Myles had discovered his secret, and that Sir Matthew was now aware that the man whom he had trusted had deceived him, and that Bessie Forester, the mother of his intended heiress, was the child of

one whose name was a bye-word and a reproach.

But leaving the Rector to the endurance of two as uncomfortable hours as he ever remembered to have passed, I shall return to Rosamond, who was left by his temporary absence a solitary being in that small cheerless lodging, where her occupations were so limited, and her reading circumscribed to a few learned works, from which she turned hopelessly, as being as incomprehensible as they were dull.

"I must go out," she said to herself at last. "I cannot endure this musty room. And the sun is shining so gloriously out upon the sea. How I should like a sail! I wish I knew any one here who would go with me—I wish——"

She was looking out from the open window, and saw, with a pleasure which she did not attempt to conceal, Percy Elliot crossing the road before the house.

He took off his hat, and uttered the stereotyped—

"What a lovely day," as he looked up at her beaming face.

"Glorious! How I should like a sail! The sight of the blue sea has quite bewitched me—it looks so tempting and so smooth."

"Will you come?" asked Elliot, all prudence forgotten in the ecstatic idea of a sail with Rosamond on that tranquil, summer-like sea, alone with her—her sweet face smiling beside him—his *own* for the moment, while he was her sole companion, her protector, and her guide.

"Do you think I might?" she said, beguiled by the prospect, but still with her heart beating more with fear than with anticipated happiness.

"Might? Why not?" he replied. "We need not be an hour absent. We will tack about near shore, and you can return at any moment that you like."

She looked so exquisitely pretty as Percy gazed up to her fair girlish face, flushed with the excitement of the anticipated enjoyment, that he urged his arguments upon her strongly.

"I really think that I will go," she said, after a few moments of deliberation with herself. "There can be no harm or danger in such a sea as that!"

"Harm and danger!" he repeated; and then, looking at his watch, "Give me ten minutes, and I will have chartered the best boat on the strand for you. Be ready when I return," he added, and then, with a walk which was

almost a run, he hastened to where the boats were lying.

Rosamond would not allow herself to *think* as she equipped herself for the expedition. She had committed herself now, and given a tacit promise, which she had neither the wish nor the courage to break. It might be wrong—she hoped it was not—but then she was so *very* happy—that in itself alarmed her. However, it was now too late to deliberate, so she hurried onward with her preparations, and when Percy entered the garden-gate, a figure evidently equipped for the hoped-for expedition met his delighted eyes.

Rosamond was duly attired in semi-nautical costume—the little hat showing the wealth of auburn hair beneath it, the cloth jacket displaying the slight graceful figure, and the petticoat, looped up for convenience' sake, but which displayed at the same time enough of an exquisite foot and ankle to turn an older and a wiser head than Percy Elliot's.

"How beautiful you look!" he exclaimed, as blushing and agitated she came to meet him, one little hand in the pocket of her jacket, and the other, ungloved, extended to take the one he held towards her. It was the first compli-

ment he had ever paid her, and it took her by surprise. Percy saw that he had startled her, but he was in wild spirits and took no heed of her alarm.

“Make haste,” he said, “our moments are counted. Is life and youth so long that we can fritter them away in dulness, and in the separation which is a daily death? Miss Fendall! To-day—for one short hour at least—let me be happy. I ask it of you as a boon, as the one gracious gift of which I shall retain the memory in loneliness and poverty, while you—”

“Hush!” she said. “Do not talk so gloomily.” She had caught the reflection of his joyous spirits, and the sudden reaction of his melancholy words affected her. “Hush! Who can guess what a day or an hour may bring forth? Who can look into the future? For *me* may be the loneliness and the poverty, while success and happiness may attend you, and with *them* will come forgetfulness of these dismal forebodings, and of the hour when you gave utterance to your lamentations.”

“Not probable,” said Percy. “But here is our boat, the ‘Jane,’ and with it our old friend Daniel, who must, I suppose, be a necessary

evil, as I cannot hope that you will trust yourself entirely to my seamanship."

Again Rosamond's heart beat quickly with the same strangely-mingled feelings of delight and apprehension. Percy watched her eagerly as her speaking countenance revealed the tumult within.

"As you please," she replied, with a deepening colour. "I am not afraid; but I think, nay, I am sure," she added, almost pleadingly, "that he had better come."

Percy said no more, but assisted her into the boat, and placed himself beside her, his hand upon the tiller, and his whole soul engrossed with the deep joy her presence gave him. Daniel interfered but little with the happiness of those two young hearts, for the words they spoke were whispered words, and he had with laudable discretion placed himself as far from the "gentlefolks" as was consistent with the safety of the "Jane" and those on board of that now famous little craft.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DECLARATION.

“ARE you very fond of Hazel Combe?” was Elliot’s first question, as, borne by the lightest of light breezes over the almost slumbering sea, he gave his entire attention to his companion.

“Very fond. I cannot remember the time when I did not love it. Some day I hope that I shall show it to you.” (Percy held his breath.) “The trees are so old and spreading, the rise and fall of the ground so beautiful, and then the deer——Oh, Mr. Elliot, if you could but see the deer! Some of them are quite tame, and will eat out of my hand!” She was but a child still, and had not outgrown a child’s pure pleasures.

“And all this will be yours one day? Is it not so? The world speaks of Miss Rosamond Fendall as the heiress of Hazel Combe, and has already given a name to the thrice happy sharer of her fortunes.”

"The world is very busy," said Rosamond, with a light laugh, "about matters of which it knows nothing. The sharer of Hazel Combe, supposing that I am ever its possessor, is utterly unknown to me—at least—I mean—" she added hesitatingly, struck by the sudden change which spread over Percy's face, "that I know so few people who—"

It seemed fated that Rosamond should, by her own inadvertence, precipitate the declaration from Percy, which she could scarcely fail to see was every moment becoming more imminent. Something of fear at her own apparent boldness, and at the same time an instinctive apprehension of owing the avowals of Elliot's love to her imagined heiress-ship, caused her to add that, after all, and notwithstanding the popular belief to the contrary, it was very probable that she would never inherit the estates of Hazel Combe. She had no right to be her grandfather's heiress. Her cousin Frederica was the daughter of Sir Matthew's eldest son, and as her influence with the kind old man was daily increasing, the chances were greatly in favour of Rica, and not herself, being eventually the favoured one.

"And if so," said Percy, in a low voice,

"you will be one step nearer to the obscure and penniless man who, even when he deemed your riches certain, dared to love you. Rosamond," he added, taking her hand between his own, for the helm was abandoned in the extremity of his agitation, while the small bark steered herself in safety onward, "Rosamond, I never meant to speak to you of love. I had intended till this moment that my secret should go down with me to the grave, but this has been too great a trial—and here—here upon the silent sea—here, with the waves below and the blue sky above us—here, with no breath of the false world around, I ask you to look into your heart, and say whether anger at my boldness is the only feeling there."

She did not answer, but something in the cast-down eyes, and quivering lip, must have given him courage, for his voice grew firmer as he said passionately—

"Rosamond, listen to me! This hour may be the most important of both our lives; and by me, at least, it shall not be wasted in meaningless words. You turn from me! My vehemence alarms and angers you! Ah, forgive me; I have so much at stake. You do not know—you cannot guess—how poor I am in

every earthly blessing, and how I hunger for the love, which I have dared in one wild, mad-dening moment to believe might, by a miracle of mercy, be bestowed upon me."

Still there was no reply, although the hand he held was not withdrawn, and Percy fancied that a slight pressure of the delicate fingers gave an answer to his passionate words.

"I do not ask for much," he said, with a kind of tender humility, which went straight to Rosamond's heart. "A little hope—one word—a look—is all I pray for. I have not been spoilt," he continued, with a mournful smile, "by a superabundance either of happiness or love. I can hope on, where others would despair, and can live on such *very* slender food—on a passing smile, a single glance of kindness—that she must be a niggard indeed who would refuse to grant my prayer."

He was silent, and Rosamond, deeply touched by his pleading tones, and with every fibre of her frame thrilling beneath the passionate pressure of the hands which held her own, raised her eyes to his—and in their speaking beauty, in their half-shy, half-flashing lustre—Percy found the answer that he sought.

They were almost alone, for the sailor's gaze

was ever seaward, and the now almost flapping sail hid him from their sight. So Percy, with a wild throb of new-born joy and gratitude, threw his arm round the girl's half-shrinking form, and pressed her to his heart.

"Thank God," he whispered. "Nay, dearest, do not tremble so. Have I done wrong to hope? if so, take back your hand. I will owe nothing to a surprise, and if——Ah, I thought it could not be! I have done well to trust your eyes. There, dearest, rest your precious head for one short moment on my heart, and let me dream a dream whose happiness is worth a life!"

Rosamond had ceased to shrink from her lover's embrace. She lay quite passively, tasting of a bliss which seemed almost alarming in its intensity, while a few murmured words, whose meaning Percy strove in vain to catch, broke from her parted lips. Percy had forgotten all but her, forgotten the uncertain element on which they floated, forgotten time and space, and every ocean chance in those fleeting instants of unutterable joy.

He was awakened rather roughly from his trance by the voice of their less preoccupied companion, and the cry, loudly spoken, of

"Down helm! hard a-port!" warned Percy in a moment of the proximity of danger.

The order was executed with a celerity which proved him to be no unpractised helmsman; and as a large schooner, with every sail set, scudded swiftly by, at only two boats' length from their little craft, Elliot saw the peril they had incurred, and severely reproached himself for his neglect and imprudence.

"The wind is freshening, eh, Daniel?" he said, as the latter, stepping aft, showed a somewhat anxious face, for the danger had been imminent, and doubts of his employer's sanity, or prudence, perhaps of both, had taken possession of the sailor's mind.

"It is, sir," he answered, touching his sou'-wester, "and blowing pretty straight off shore. Them are dirty clouds coming up, and it would be best, perhaps, to get the lady in afore the storm comes on us."

Percy thought so too, for the sky during the last hour had become gradually covered, and heavy masses of threatening clouds had usurped the place of the light blue vault which, when they left the shore, had reflected its image in the tranquil sea. That sea was anything but tranquil now. The waves were gradually in-

creasing in size, and were tipped with the white foam, which at every tack flew over the boat's deck, and threatened to drench Rosamond to the skin.

They had drifted, with the light wind which had wafted them from the land, much farther than they had either wished or intended, and Percy, although he forbore to express any of his alarm to Rosamond, began to entertain some fear that night would fall upon them ere they could return.

Meanwhile the strongly-built little vessel behaved beautifully, and Rosamond, as she danced over the waves, was the happiest of the happy! To be close to Percy—to watch him as with his strong seaman's hand he steered the cutter over those now boiling waves—to look up into his handsome face without a fear of meeting those tell-tale dangerous eyes—to know that as she lay crouching almost at his feet, with his rough sailor's jacket thrown around her, every thought which he could spare from his momentary duty was for her—these were elements of enjoyment as new to her as they were unspeakably delightful.

At last, however, even Rosamond, engrossed as she was by the blissful novelty of the situa-

tion, began to perceive that the night was closing in, and that the sea had grown very rough.

“Are we near the land?” she asked timidly, from her shelter beneath the weather bulwark.

“A mile only,” answered Percy—“scarcely more—and the sea will be smoother every moment now. How brave you are, my darling! You were born to be a sailor’s wife,” he added, as a wave larger than the rest sent showers of spray over the boat’s quarter, and Rosamond, beginning to shiver both with cold and apprehension, asked if there was any danger.

“You call me brave—what is there to fear?” she said; and her teeth chattered, in spite of her efforts to seem courageous.

“Nothing, darling. Daniel, take in another reef. We can’t help it; she won’t carry so much sail. That’s it—all right. And now, dearest, that all is snug, she will ride much easier, and you must make up your mind to be half-an-hour longer in the cold and wet.”

Rosamond did not care the least for that, she said. She only hoped the Rector would not be made anxious by knowing that she was on the sea; and then she ensconced herself once more

in the pea-jacket, and gave herself up to thoughts of Percy.

As he had predicted, everything went much more smoothly under a lesser press of canvas. They shipped fewer seas, and as they neared the land the force of the wind was deadened.

Happy as Elliot felt in the companionship of her to whom his troth was plighted, it was, nevertheless, with considerable satisfaction that he approached the little pier, where many persons were assembled anxiously watching for their return.

Foremost in the group was Santland, who had heard with dismay of Rosamond's escapade, and who was now, with a grave, reproachful face, waiting to escort his dripping charge to the house which she had temporarily abandoned.

CHAPTER IX.

PERCY ELLIOT HESITATES.

ROSAMOND's peace with the Rector was soon made, for the latter was not one to bear hardly on the imprudence of youth, and the girl's frankness—a virtue which she inherited from her mother—possessed for him an irresistible attraction.

"But, my child," he said, after Rosamond had, with a cheek dyed in blushes, confessed that Percy Elliot had not sued in vain. "But, my child, remember that we know nothing, or next to nothing, of this poor young man. And whatever you may imagine, *first sight* in love is very much at variance with *second sight*. Of course you imagine that you can look into futurity, and can see this handsome gentleman endowed with all the gifts of Fortune—rich, prosperous, and honoured. Pshaw ! First love blinds you, dear, to all the hard reality. You forget the humble tutor in the imaginary

hero ; and, scorning to look at lower things, and refusing to behold this beloved and chivalrous Percy training cubs, and drilling Euclid into barren brains, you see him only kneeling at your feet, and expecting impossible miracles for the lady of his love."

Rosamond took refuge in silence under the Rector's unwelcome statement of facts. Her enthusiasm was checked by his bantering tone, and over-excited as she had been, the ready tears found their way to her eyelids.

" And do you think, my dear," the Rector went on to say, " that the course of this new love of yours will run quite smooth when Sir Matthew learns the truth as it will be told by those about him? Things are changed, my child, since you, and I, and Bessie—poor darling Bessie—had weight with that poor, weak old man. He is not what he was ; his intellects are failing him, and God knows," he added, with a heavy sigh, " what will be the last foolish act of one who is in his latter days deprived of those who would have guided the blind wanderer safely into port."

Before the night was over, Rosamond had learned from the Rector how unsatisfactory had been his visit to her grandfather, and how

greatly his fears for her future welfare had been increased by all he had that day seen and heard.

"But, sir," said Rosamond, with what her companion considered a provoking *insouciance*, "I cannot feel so very anxious now about Hazel Combe. If it is right that Rica should supplant me, why it had better be so. I have no wish to be an heiress. My poor, dear grandfather—when God sees fit to take him—will not leave me penniless, and——"

"Do you forget your promise?" interrupted Santland, in a low, hoarse voice—"your promise to your mother and to me, Rosamond? Should the estates of Hazel Combe be alienated from you, the chances are that you will inherit from Sir Matthew but little more than will be sufficient to enable you to redeem that solemn pledge. Is it not then incumbent on you to defend your rights valiantly, not only for others' sakes, but for your own and Percy's? It is with this conviction on my mind, that I have engaged myself for your return to your uncle's care to-morrow. And once there, I strongly recommend secrecy for the present, as to this day's occurrences. My poor little girl," he added, kindly, as he fixed his eyes on her pale,

delicate face, "you are young to begin the hard battle of life, and your courage is as yet untried; but if I mistake not, my Bessie's daughter will not shrink from the conflict; and the consciousness, my dear, that you are performing your duty both to the living and the dead, will be your exceeding great reward."

The conversation between the Rector and Rosamond concerning the engagement tacitly entered into by the latter, was certainly not calculated to calm the spirits which the day's adventures had so heavily tried; and Rosamond, as she laid herself wearily upon her bed, felt that even the vivid memory of Percy's looks and words was not sufficient to banish other and less cheerful thoughts which thronged about her, as till daylight dawned she turned restlessly upon her sleepless couch.

Nor was the evening passed by Percy Elliot in his aunt's society better calculated to send him in a placid state of mind to his repose. On his return he had found Miss Jefferson in a perfect agony of nervous trepidation. Her dread of the sea's dangers was unbounded, and as hour succeeded hour, and no Percy returned to laugh at her fears and soothe her into calmness, she began to apprehend the worst; till at

last, worked up to desperation by every puff of wind which rattled her ill-fitting casement window, she could imagine her nephew only in the character of a dripping corpse, borne in a horizontal posture to the house which he had lately left full'of life and vigour.

So engrossed was she by these distracting forebodings that when the music of Percy's step sounded on the stairs she could scarcely believe her ears, and it required the touch on her cheek of his lips, wet with the salt sea spray, to convince her of his identity.

Before an hour had passed away, Miss Jefferson had heard the whole of her nephew's story, and could sympathise both with his pleasures and his pains. Her first feeling was one of unmitigated delight; but she was not surprised. No heiress could be too rich and grand in her opinion for her darling Percy, and fair and winning as Miss Fendall was, her beauty and her grace were only the meet reward and guerdon of her nephew's manifold perfections.

"And Percy," the good woman said, looking fondly and admiringly at his handsome face, "you must allow that I may have had some little share in bringing this delightful match

about. It is not much that I can do, but I can put in my word, and Miss Fendall has learnt a little, I flatter myself, in her visits here, of Percy Elliot's kindness to his poor old aunt, and—”

“ Ah ! well, Aunt Agatha,” broke in Percy, who to say the truth had several times felt his patience sorely tried by Miss Jefferson's mistaken praises. “ Ah, well ! perhaps it would have been better if you had spared your praises of my unworthy self, and prepared the way instead, for the telling of my deplorable story. The truth will now break upon poor Rosamond like a thunderbolt, and—God knows—it may be that she will not be proof against the world's harsh judgments. Thank Heaven, however, that she is not an heiress ! I held my peace so long as I believed her rich, and if she will but share my humble fortunes—”

What more he would have said on the old hackneyed theme of disinterested attachments ; of love in that rarely comfortable tenement yclept a 'cottage ; and of young lovers setting up housekeeping on an unlimited capital of love alone, must remain a mystery, for he was stopped short in his dissertation by Miss Jefferson saying in a tone of alarm—

“ Miss Fendall not an heiress ! Percy ! This is

news indeed! And if she is not, how are you to live? You cannot take pupils and a wife besides! And what will your mother say? Really, Percy, you have quite distressed and disappointed me." And the poor weak woman broke out into sobs of nervous agitation.

Percy was very sorry. But he could not undo the past—and as to his mother, there was so little sympathy between him and her, that he hardly felt it necessary to write to her on the subject.

" My mother has never in her life shown me the thousandth part of the affection that you have done, dear Aunt Agatha," he said; " she turned upon me in my great distress, and rendered the more bitter the sorrow which her love might have alleviated. And when I think," he added gloomily, " that a mother could so act—that a mother on whose natural affection I had relied should have disbelieved my words, and overwhelmed her son with reproaches and with scorn, then I begin to fear that I have reckoned far too much on Rosamond's affection, and that the blessed gleam of hope which has shone upon my path this evening, will be fleeting as the sunshine of an April day."

“ But,” said his aunt, timidly, “ is it necessary, dear Percy, that Miss Fendall should be made acquainted with what passed so long ago, and which has probably ere this been forgotten by the world? Surely so slight a circumstance, and one in which, in point of fact, you were so guiltless——”

“ Hush! Aunt Agatha,” said Percy. “ And forgive me when I say that even from you I cannot bear the mention of that painful subject. I must have time to think—time to consider how best to make Miss Fendall acquainted with the past. And now, good-night, dear aunt. Sleep well, and do not let a wearied face to-morrow reproach me with the anxiety I have caused you.”

He was gone before Miss Jefferson could reply—gone to begin letter after letter to Rosamond—gone to decide upon a plan of departure which the morning found him only the more fully resolved to execute.

CHAPTER X.

WOMAN'S TRUST.

"MY DEAREST,"—so wrote Percy Elliot in the letter which, early on the following morning, found its way to Rosamond's bedside,—
"My Dearest,—Not twelve hours have elapsed since I parted from you, secure, as I hoped, in the unspeakable blessing of your love, and now I write to give you back that priceless boon, and bid you, if you can, forget me, Rosamond ! Reflection has shown me that only a momentary madness could excuse the presumption of which I yesterday was guilty ; and yet, my dear one—ah ! let me in this one only letter pour forth the words of tenderness which will not be repressed—and yet, my dear one, something tells me that it is not for her whose beauty called forth the offence to be *entirely* merciless to the offender ; and therefore I take courage, hoping for that charity which the most hardened sinners may not always expect

in vain. My Rosamond, when I learned from your dear lips that, in worldly fortunes at least, you were not, as I had feared, so infinitely my superior, a sudden impulse—and one which I strove in vain to resist—tempted me to betray the secret of my love, which I had sworn to keep from you for ever. And you!—ah! when you listened to the avowal of that love, and did not scorn the offering which I laid in all humility at your feet, you could not guess that he who dared to hope was one doomed by a heavy curse to isolation and despair! Yes, Rosamond, the world's ban and the brand of its contempt are on me; and yet, while divulging to you this cruel truth, I could say much which, to as tender and as true a heart as yours, might excite a feeling of compassion for him whom you no longer loved; but this I will not do. It is enough that I have surprised you into a half-avowal of a feeling which I pray, for your sake, may soon be amongst the recollections of the past, for I would not owe even the blessing of your love to pity for a misfortune which my conscience tells me I have not deserved. When this letter reaches you, and while your eyes are dwelling upon the words which I have written with a heart God only knows how heavy! will

some softening thought of him who has *seemed* so fickle and so selfish bid you pardon his momentary error? Will you think of me with kindness, Rosamond, when I am far away? And if—which, alas! may happen—you should hear me spoken of with stinging words of scorn, will you say to yourself, with an angel's gentleness and charity, '*He* swore to me that he was innocent, and *I believed him?*' I have but little more to say, but still, like the convicted prisoner whose time on earth is measured, I cling to the few short moments that remain, before I bid farewell to her in whom my very life seems bound. And, Rosamond, if—but, no, I dare not hope it—but still, if you should wish to comfort me with one sweet word of pardon, I send you my address. It is to the house of the rich merchant of whose sons I am the schoolmaster that you must send your letter, for I am but a poor paid worker for my daily bread, but a little higher in the social scale than the footman who waits behind your chair. Bear this fact ever in your mind, my Rosamond, and while it heightens the disgust and scorn with which you think upon the man who dared to love you, it will at least assist you to forget him."

Rosamond read this letter twice before she could even bring herself to believe that Percy Elliot, the man to whom she had given her heart, and he who but yesterday had appeared full of life's best blessing—happiness—could in reality be the writer of those despairing farewell lines.

She could not understand it.. He talked of the world's contempt!—he who had seemed so far above either its praise or censure! He spoke also of unjust accusations. Unjust! of course they were, if they had for their object Percy Elliot—*her* Percy!—he who—but what folly all this was! She had but to see him—had but to hear his story, and say to him all that was in her heart of perfect truth and trust—and then she would see him smile again, and that most wretched letter would be forgotten.

But how was she to see him? It might—and the thought made her turn sick at heart—it might be really true that he was *gone*, and that she (Rosamond did not think about her own grief) could not seek out her betrothed, and, laying his head upon her true heart, whisper to him that, come what would, through evil report and good, in adversity and in prosperity, through

life and till the hour of death, she was his own to love, to comfort, and to sustain.

There was something very fascinating to Rosamond in the idea that she, a young and inexperienced girl, possessed the power of supporting by a word the courage of such a man as her fancy had drawn in Percy Elliot. I call it her "fancy," for what, in truth, as the Rector had remarked, did she know either of the antecedents, the character, or the principles of him who a month before had been, even by name, a stranger to her? But, bold in the confidence engendered by ignorance and innocence, Rosamond went on her way, nothing doubting; and when a third perusal had shown her that Percy had probably left her no resource but to pour forth on paper the expression of her feelings, she decided that not a moment was to be lost in commencing the delightful duty of consolation.

She sprung lightly from her bed as the fortunate idea occurred to her that delay in writing her confession of faith was unnecessary, and, thrusting her small feet into their velvet slippers, she, with a large wrapper loosely flung around her, began her reply to Percy Elliot's letter.

The weather was cold, and the room both fireless and sunless ; but what did Rosamond care, as she rapidly, and utterly without fear of any possible evil consequences to herself, traced the tender words which were to be as balm poured into the wounds of her lover's heart.

With flushed cheeks, and eager, trembling hands, she wrote that he was loved and trusted —so loved and trusted, that no base, cruel accusations, no false testimony of envious men or women, could ever shake her confidence in his honour and his loyalty. She did not ask to know his secret ; she only trusted that he loved her still, and if it were so, well—she would be ever true to him, true as in the hour when she placed her hand in his, and, resting her head upon his breast, swore in her inmost heart that she would be his own for ever.

So wrote the girl of eighteen (nor is she the first by thousands who have done a deed so rash) to the man for whose honour she had no better security than that which lay in her own innate conviction of his worth. If, at the moment when she was inditing those purely innocent and yet half-burning words, any one had ventured to whisper into Rosamond's ear that women have been lost ere now by the very

imprudence she was committing, the young girl would not have stayed her hand, nor benefited by the wise counsel given her. She would have laughed at the assertion that there existed men capable of such cowardly treachery, and cursed with a vanity so contemptible that they would turn a woman's love into a weapon against herself. And so, with a heart incapable of estimating the danger she incurred, and with a hand made bold by her lover's self-abasement, she signed herself his only love—his dearest, soul-devoted

ROSAMOND.

CHAPTER XI.

PERCY'S CONSOLATION.

WHEN Rosamond met Mr. Santland at breakfast, her own letter and that to which it was a reply, were hidden in that safe place of custody, the folds of crape which veiled her beating heart. She did not breathe a syllable to the Rector of Percy's mysterious confession; but merely told him that she had received a letter from her betrothed, explaining the necessity of his immediate return to his duties; and then—for the subject was one which embarrassed Rosamond—she turned the conversation to other subjects.

And all the while, though listening with apparent attention to Santland's conversation, her thoughts were on the absent one, while from time to time she pressed closer to her loving breast the paper which his hand had touched. Very slowly and gloomily would that forenoon have passed for Rosamond but for the possession

of that often-gazed-at treasure ! She would have felt so utterly alone ! The future so complete a blank, and with a darkness which her soul could *feel* enveloping the present ! But now she had so much for memory to dwell upon—such looks, such words—both said and written—that although there was no actual Percy to join them in their walk, and though the sun had lost its brightness, and the dark blue sea its beauty, still Rosamond did not feel alone, nor did the absence of her lover crush her spirit down.

In the afternoon—it was to be their last excursion—the Rector and Rosamond walked out together. They paid a visit to Miss Jefferson, whom they found indulging in the luxury of tears—grieving over Percy's departure, and wondering how it was that she had never dreamt or guessed that he was about to leave her.

"For I always dream, Miss Fendall," said Aunt Agatha. "I don't think there is another such a dreamer in the world; and, do you know, that last night, instead of its being 'teeth,' or 'crape,' or any of the things which tell you harm is going to happen, I dreamt about nothing but a marriage."

"In which I hope that you played a conspicuous part," said the Rector, rising. He had very little patience with what he called Miss Jefferson's twaddle, and the restlessness which Rosamond had often noticed was always doubly evident in Aunt Agatha's little parlour.

"And I too must say good-bye, Miss Jefferson," said Rosamond, taking the poor woman's hand, and pressing it kindly. "I leave this place to-morrow, I am sorry to say, and it may be very long before we meet again."

She could not keep back her tears, and Aunt Agatha, who was at all times ready for what is popularly called a "good cry," made no attempt to close the flood-gates of her emotion.

The farewells were, happily for both, cut short by Mr. Santland, who, mercilessly reminding his young companion that it was growing late, hurried her away.

Their walk led them to the churchyard, where, at a short distance from a gigantic yew, the little shipwrecked children lay with their drowned parents in one common grave.

"The emblem of immortality," said Santland, as he gathered a sprig from the old tree, and put it into Rosamond's hand, "of immortality and endurance; and therefore I suppose

it is that the yew is always planted on the south side of our churchyards, in order that the sun of hope may shine for the believers through what we have been taught to consider as the evergreen of the grave."

He stood for some time with clasped hands and mournful countenance beside the tiny tombstones.

"The little children have gone unto Him," he murmured. "The only safe ones. Ah me ! the only safe ones are those who have been taken, before the Evil One could have made ready his weapons to conquer the weak souls and weaker bodies of those who have no power of themselves to help themselves. Rosamond," he added aloud, as they turned from the spot, "when I am gone——"

"Gone!" exclaimed Rosamond, in affright ; "gone ! Oh, sir, do not speak of going ! You are my only friend—my only counsellor ! Oh ! let us give up this struggle. Let us remain together, with——"

"With Percy Elliot, I suppose, *en tiers*," put in the Rector, with one of those sudden changes "from grave to gay—from lively to severe," which used in former days to characterise his conversation. "Well, my dear, since

it distresses you, I will not talk of *going*. We shall meet soon, I hope, at Hazel Combe, and then we can concentrate our small forces for the defeat of the enemy. Have you letters for the post? Ah! I see one for Percy. I fear I have not been over-wise," he said half to himself, "in encouraging this great intimacy; but it is too late now, and we cannot put old thoughts into young hearts."

With which conclusive remark from the Rector as an accompaniment to the act, Rosamond Fendall slipped her first love-letter into the post-box, and her last walk through the little village which had been the scene of so much quiet happiness as well as of exciting adventure, was at an end.

When that letter reached its destination, Percy Elliot was seated at his early dinner with the pupils whom he was training to be alike the ornaments and the defenders of their country—at least such were the hopes indulged by the sanguine parents, who, in their fine country house, not ten miles from Manchester, watched from day to day, and with ever-increasing delight, the moral and physical improvement of their offspring.

They were far from being unamiable people

—that cotton lord and lady—a little given, perhaps, in the case of the former, to mistake dulness for dignity, while the conviction felt by both of their importance was not so strong, but that they felt constantly called upon to *do* the important. To have their pennyworth for their penny was an axiom—unspoken, perhaps, but still an axiom—with Mr. and Mrs. Hartopp; and as they *did* pay fifty pounds quarterly to Mr. Percy Elliot, why, they chose naturally enough to reap the full benefit of the expenditure. So Mr. Elliot, the good-looking, gentleman-like tutor, was produced at luncheon for the observation of any strangers who might chance to be present at the meal; while the lady of the house—and on Sundays the “gentleman”—treated him with an underbred courtesy, and a superabundance of civility, which said as plainly as spoken words, that they were the paymasters, and he the recipient of their bounty.

Percy troubled himself but little either with their condescension or their pride. The luxuries displayed upon the table were lost upon him. The haunch of doe venison from “my lord's” might have been, for aught he cared, the very sorriest of mutton, and the well preserved grapes

were in his sight no better than the haws which grew upon the hedgerows. Even the jokes of his favourite pupil Jamie fell unheeded on his ear, and Mrs. Hartopp was beginning to look with anger on what she called his ill-bred absence of mind, when the arrival of the post-bag diverted her attention from the tutor's shortcomings.

"Did you see how white old Percy got?" asked Jamie of his brother, as the two lads, whose respective ages were fourteen and fifteen, bounded across the spacious hall to the "croquet" in which their hearts delighted.

"Yes—it was a woman's writing, that I'm certain of," said the elder boy, who was intimate with the "officers," and whose sisters had initiated him (unwittingly, however, on their part) into some of the wiles of their sex.

"Was it? Well, never mind! good luck to him," cried Jamie; "I say, where's my ball?" and in another minute they were deep in the excitement of their game.

Meanwhile the poor tutor—it was one of his half-hours of holiday—clasped Rosamond's letter to his heart and rushed upstairs two steps at a time to a room where he could read the precious missive undisturbed. It was such

joy that she should write at all ! There would be kindly woman's words he knew—no more—he could not hope, he did not wish, he told himself, for aught beside ; and yet, when he had read Rosamond's few lines, those lines which spoke so eloquently of love and tenderness, can we wonder that Percy's good resolutions should again vanish to the winds, and that, forgetting all past shame, and the chances of future mortification, he should in his lonely chamber have hailed the writer of that precious letter as his own, own Rosamond, the angel sent to cheer his solitary path—and the light to lead him onward to a brighter day !

CHAPTER XII.

COLONEL FENDALL'S NEWS.

THE increased weakness of Sir Matthew Fendall, a weakness which effected a considerable change in the daily habits of his life, was not thoroughly realised by his grand-daughter till after the return of the family to Hazel Combe. *There*, however, the sudden "breaking up" became painfully visible; for the ruin, time-worn, and "toppling to its fall," as it appeared, had remained for so long a period *in statu quo*, that those who looked upon it had grown accustomed to the daily danger of its destruction.

Scarcely two months had elapsed since the old Baronet had left his home, and then Time had dealt with him full tenderly; but now he returned amongst his neighbours a weak, bent-down, and spiritless old man. The aged servants—there were few changes in the Hazel Combe household—noticed the alteration in

their master, and commented upon it with grieved and anxious faces.

"I grow very old," Sir Matthew remarked to Rica, as on the day of their return he feebly traversed, leaning on her arm, the spacious entrance hall, anxious only, as it seemed, to reach with as little delay as possible the favourite arm-chair in which he could rest and sleep in peace.

Rosamond could not suppress a sigh as she followed slowly on their footsteps. Well did she remember the time—it was not so very far distant—when *she* would have been chosen as the support of that dear old man, whose heart had, as she could not but feel, been gradually but surely alienated from her.

"I think you walk much stronger, dear grandpapa, to-day," was the comforting comment of Frederica, as she deposited Sir Matthew safely in his favourite place, and stirred the fire to exactly the amount of heat which she knew he most enjoyed.

"Thank you, my dear," rejoined the courteous gentleman of the old school—for he was one of those rare "masters of a family," who never forget the respectful observances due to their womankind. "Thank you; I am very

troublesome ; but you will make excuses for an old man like me—a very old man, my dear—the ‘oldest inhabitant,’ ” he added, with his pleasant smile, “ I think I may be called,” and he looked, with a half-childish desire to be complimented, into Rica’s face.

She did not contradict him, for well she knew that the octogenarian had arrived at that period of life when a man is proud of bearing vigorously the weight of years. And truly, I repeat, till lately Sir Matthew had not seemed to stoop beneath his burthen. A very green bay-tree in strength and health had he been considered—green even as in his “salad days,” if to be green implies that his was an honest and an unsuspecting nature—a nature that a child might play upon, and a heart whose simple machinery was so softened by the oil of kindness that the very weakest of the weaker sex could pull the strings and set the works agoing.

But pliable as was the excellent Sir Matthew, and easily influenced as he had ever shown himself by those about him, his innate rectitude of character, and inherent stock of plain common sense, were against the ultimate success of Rica’s plans. Still his little grand-daughter amused and fascinated him. She was pretty,

lively, attentive, and good-humoured ; whereas Rosamond, still in deep mourning for her mother, and with a countenance often clouded by anxious thought, recalled to her grandfather's mind painful scenes, which, with the natural and growing selfishness of age, he would willingly have banished from his memory.

Sir Matthew and Rosamond were glad to find themselves at home again. The former, indeed, had never felt comfortable in Brunswick Square. He disliked the noise and glare, while the constant ingress and egress of visitors disturbed and fretted him. In short, it is not unreasonable to suppose that so complete and unwelcome a change of scene and habits was not a little instrumental in bringing about the "breaking up," over the signs of which Rosamond was silently commenting.

But they were all now safe at home again. The huge beech logs (there was no beechwood to burn at Brighton) were blazing away in the wide chimney of the spacious library. The great Indian screen was carefully placed behind Sir Matthew's shoulders, and the evening sun was flickering through the net-work of budding branches which stretched half-way across the oriel window.

Before the fire stood Colonel Myles reading a letter which had arrived by that morning's post at Hazel Combe. He seemed entirely engrossed by its contents—so engrossed that Rica, whose jealousy was always excited by any extraneous interest exhibited by her brother, inquired twice if there was any news, before Myles could feel such interest in her question as would enable him to reply to it.

"News! Yes, by Jove! great news!" he said, when Rica questioned him for the third time, and rather angrily, regarding the contents of his letter. "Laura has bolted! I knew she would! You can't hold those well-bred fillies with a 'hard and sharp.' She's gone off with the Major, and of course half London's talking of it."

The answering exclamations of the two girls were characteristic enough.

"Five hundred a-year! And such a major!" from Rica; while Rosamond, full of pity for the disgrace which she feared had fallen upon her friend, murmured in her soft voice—

"My poor Laura! Oh, Myles! how and when did this happen?"

"Happen!" repeated Fendall, sneeringly. "You call it fate, do you? Now, I set it all

down to *fastness*. Your friend Laura, in her peculiar way, is as fast a young lady as I chance to be acquainted with, and——”

“What’s the matter? What’s it all about?” mumbled Sir Matthew from the depths of his easy-chair. He saw excitement in their faces, but his deafness rendered it difficult for him to catch their words.

“Only that Miss Laura has run away with the Dragoon,” shouted Colonel Fendall in the old man’s ear.

“Run away!—I don’t understand,” said the puzzled Sir Matthew, who had not heard the termination of the sentence.

“Laura has married Major Walker, grandpapa,” said Rica, who always made a point of simplifying matters for Sir Matthew’s benefit. “Myles, why don’t you read out the letter? It may amuse grandpapa to hear it; and what half London is talking about need be no secret to us.”

But it was evidently very far from the Colonel’s intention to gratify his sister’s curiosity. Nor ought we to wonder at his reticence; for the letter in his hand was probably the production of some juvenile club *habitué*—one of those male gossips whose trade it is to spread

exaggerated reports of women's imprudences—magnifying folly into guilt, and translating the happy spirits of girlhood into unmaidenly forwardness. It was not unlikely, too, that the *names* of those silly ones whose inexperience of the world and human nature had opened a door to calumny and suspicion, were written down boldly in that precious epistle. For these are days when reputations are handled roughly by manly fingers; and it therefore behoves women (remembering that the days of chivalry are past) to put on the whole armour of discretion; and, sharpening *becs et ongles* against the cold whetstone of propriety, to make ready for such feeble defence as they are capable of setting up.

Seeing that, for some reason unexplainable, as it appeared to her, Myles was bent on keeping secret the contents of his letter, Frederica, with a flush of anger on her face, suggested that, as they did not seem destined to receive much entertainment from Colonel Fendall's correspondence, it would be as well to dress for dinner.

"Grandpapa is tired, too," she said, in the clear low tones which Sir Matthew always heard distinctly; "and a half-hour's nap before dinner will do him good."

She placed a screen before the old man's face, gave one finishing touch of comfort to the cushion which supported his head, and then, after softly kissing his forehead, she, with a dignity befitting the mistress of Hazel Combe, preceded her companions from the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

LAURA'S ELOPEMENT.

THE next morning brought to Rosamond a letter from Hortense de Berny, and in it was confirmation strong as proofs of unholy writ (I am alluding to the missive privately read and gloated over by Myles), of Laura's headstrong folly.

" You will be so sorry for us, *ma chère*," wrote poor Hortense, " at least for me. As for Laura, she is at present, of course, in the seventh heaven of happiness. This *triste histoire* has not surprised me. Poor little Laura was, as we know well, always *éprise* of some tall lover, whom she exalted into a *héros de roman*; and now I hope she will be contented. Major Walker—*hélas!* she is Mrs. Walker now—is tall enough to satisfy her most lofty aspirations, and he has fought and bled for his country. Ah! *ma Rose du monde, ma Rose unique, toi qui es si délicate, si exaltée dans tous tes senti-*

ments, tu comprendras ce que cela veut dire— for do you not feel with me, that if men only could imagine what a powerful seduction to a woman is the performance of a heroic act, and how we shrink with disgust from all that is *mesquin*, mean, and cowardly, *they* would be *greater* than they are—even cowards would become brave, and—*car tous les miracles sont possibles*—the age of chivalry might be restored?"

Then followed details of Laura's elopement, her marriage, and her future prospects as Majoress, as Myles called her, of Her Majesty's Twenty-third Regiment of Dragoons.

"Of course, Laura considers *que c'est une position magnifique*," continued Hortense. "*Et elle est capable, ma foi, de caracoler en amazone à la tête de son régiment. Mais, en définitive,* she has for her living only eight hundred a year, *y compris la solde; et après cela viendront les enfants, les dettes, les querelles de ménage, et Dieu sait*—as a wind-up—the decision of the House of Lords on her domestic disagreements!"

It was a melancholy prospect, a wretched epitome of poor little Laura's very probable fate; and Rosamond, as she laid down the prematurely wise effusion, philosophised for a

moment on inadequate means, imprudent marriages, and all the ills which are entailed on the impulsive by the indulgence of their dangerous inclinations.

Only for a moment, however, did she dwell upon a theme so dull and so discouraging—for hope is almost invariably triumphant over experience—the more especially when that experience is not our own. So Rosamond opened her desk, and after safely depositing the letter she had been reading into its secret recess, she proceeded to the far more agreeable task of pouring out her whole heart in loving words to Percy.

She had decided, contrary both to her inclination and her sense of duty, to keep her engagement for the present a secret from her family. She had been led to this resolution—at least so she whispered to her conscience—by the advice of one whom the habits of her life had caused her to look up to, as her surest, safest guide; but, in reality, Rosamond was moved to her course of concealment by other motives. She feared her cousins' ridicule and contempt, while Percy's unexplained account of his own equivocal position, rendered it impossible for her to brave the satirical remarks and

sneering inuendoes, which she felt convinced would ultimately be her portion.

"If he would but confide in me entirely," she said to herself as, laying down her pen, a feeling of discouragement stole over her, whilst the veil of mystery in which Percy Elliot was enveloped seemed to thicken, till it grew dense as the ocean vapour from which his presence of mind had rescued her.

"If he would but confide in me entirely! And if he cannot, must there not be something (she could not bring herself to use the word *disgraceful*) which seals his lips, and renders openness impossible?"

For the space of a minute the idea rested on her mind, that she would entreat him to be frank, and would implore him by all the love he bore her to have no secrets from her, who, once his wife, would have the right to share his every joy and sorrow.

"He cannot be proof against my entreaties," she murmured, as she rapidly traced the lines which she doubted not would extract an unlimited amount of confidence from her lover. "But then, ah, may he not think his Rosamond mistrusts his word, and deems it possible that he may deserve the obloquy under which he suffers?"

She tore up the page which she had written and made an offering of it to the flames.

“Perhaps he is only trying me,” she thought, as she brushed the unbidden tears from their long lashes. “But no—such a scheme were as unworthy of my Percy as doubts of him are of the woman whom he loves. *My* Percy,” she repeated fondly, “you shall never have to reproach your Rosamond with the mean vice of curiosity. Wholly and unreservedly will I trust you, and if in after years you should judge me worthy of your confidence, what happiness it will be to reflect that in the days when I had the power to *exact* I left that power unexercised.”

It was a pretty sentiment—truthful, tender, girlish. How far the inspirer of so much unquestioning devotion was worthy of such an unlimited amount of trust it remains for these pages to make manifest.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STOLEN INTERVIEW.

MONTHS passed away, the summer came, and no great changes occurred in the old halls of Hazel Combe. With the month of August Lord and Lady Westerham, with the now more than ever quietly disposed Hortense, returned to the Abbey. Colonel Fendall, too, who had been seduced by the attractions of the London season into being a good deal absent from the Combe, returned to it as his habitual residence. He was on half-pay now, almost an honorary member of the army—that army whose desperate, hardest work was yet to do; for the Indian mutiny was at its height, and British troops were being poured into the distant empire as fast as steam and money could despatch them to the seat of war.

“ My poor little Laura,” said Hortense to her friend (the former was paying a short visit to the Combe, and the friends were *tête-à-tête*

in Rosamond's pretty boudoir). "My poor little Laura! She knows something now of the difference between war's romance and its reality. Such oceans of tears as she shed yesterday before we left town! Certainly nature never intended her for a heroine, for she looks on the departure for India of the Twenty-third Dragoons as the heaviest of misfortunes, and if she could but wrap up her gigantic major in cotton, and fasten him to her châtelaine, I verily believe she would be the happiest little woman in existence."

Rosamond was silent, thinking of the cloud which rested upon *her* lover's fame, and on Laura's enviable fortune in the possession of her soldier husband with his halting gait (the effect of his battle wounds) and his readiness for the forthcoming campaign.

"There are many sorrier hearts than Laura's just now," she said at length.

"Well, yes," replied her practical friend. "There are the widows and orphans, the bereaved mothers, and the maddened husbands of those who have fallen victims to these 'mild Hindoos.' Rosamond! I am, as you and I are well convinced, no heroine; I am neither brave nor strong-minded, and yet," she added, sud-

denly changing her language into French, as was her wont in rare moments of enthusiasm, and when roused by her sympathy with the unfortunate. “And yet *il me semble que je serais presque capable de me faire soldat pour venger ces pauvres innocents. Et si j'avais un mari ou un frère qui hésitât à combattre ces monstres d'Indous, je ferais tous mes efforts pour l'y contraindre.*” And I would talk—ah! you should hear how I would talk, and how much I could despise such cowards!”

And the spirited French girl set her small white teeth, and clenched her little *bien gantée* hand, in testimony of her prowess.

Every word that Hortense uttered was as a dagger’s thrust to Rosamond, for every sentence seemed (and yet she scarcely knew why) to savour of reproach to Percy Elliot; the Percy Elliot of whom, even to Hortense, she dared not speak—the Percy Elliot whom she had promised to meet on the following morning, clandestinely, in a part of the grounds which she had pointed out to him as the place in which their interview was least likely to be interrupted.

She had not seen her lover since the day when, wrapped in his sheltering garment, she

had stood with him for one happy moment of farewell under the porch of Mr. Santland's dwelling. He had clasped her to his heart then, and had pressed one long burning kiss upon her lips. The memory of that parting had even now the power to make her heart beat quicker, and to cause the blood to mount upward to her cheek ; but months of absence, while they had not decreased her love, had made her look more calmly on *possibilities*, and sometimes, with a dreary pang, Rosamond feared that she might have bestowed her heart unworthily.

The morning came : a soft, warm, dewy August morning, and just as the clock struck six, Rosamond, whose hours were known to be early, left the house, and, passing through a door on the west side of the house, found herself in her favourite flower-garden. Many of the windows looked that way, and amongst them were those belonging to the rooms which were inhabited by her cousins.

The reflection that this was the case did not trouble Rosamond. It was not the first time by many that she had, before the rest of the household was awake, descended the stone stairs which led from the glass door into the garden. She had had no hidden object then

in her matutinal excursions, and they had passed unnoticed. Besides, of what was she afraid? Percy Elliot was her betrothed; he was a gentleman—he was the Rector's friend! Yes, he was all this, and yet Rosamond felt like a guilty creature as she stole from her grandfather's house; and involuntarily her pace was quickened as she wended her way to the place of rendezvous.

Along the holly-tree walk, and past the kitchen-gardens, where the labouring men were beginning their daily work, sped Rosamond, her heart beating with the same wild mixture of joy and fear which she had felt when Percy had bid her sail with him upon the silent sea; and with her bosom heaving alike with agitation and in consequence of the hurried steps she took.

He was there before her! Well she knew that this would be so; and for one moment—the moment when he held her to his breast—all was happiness—happiness unspeakable and without alloy.

They sat down at the foot of an aged apple-tree, whose branches bent beneath its load of ripening fruit, while the mistletoe displayed its white cornelian berries, and thick masses of

uncouth verdure amongst the already decaying foliage of the tree.

Their talk was all of love: till that topic should be exhausted there was little chance of other subjects of conversation being mooted between them. And was it likely that they would cease to linger over Love's pleasant delusions? for they were young and impasioned, and had not yet beheld, even in fancy, the reverse of Hope's worthless medal.

So the hour which Rosamond had devoted to this blissful interview was over, and still no plans for the future had been discussed, nor had Percy even alluded to the possibility of enlightening his beloved one regarding the mystery which encircled him. During that hour perfect silence had reigned around them. There was not a rustle in the leaves, nor the murmur of a bird's wing on the air. No human form had ventured near their temporary paradise, and not a doubt had crossed the minds of either that their stolen interview was unknown to mortal man.

At length the time came for them to endure again the sweet sorrow of parting, and Rosamond—it was her chief imprudence—could not resist the temptation of allowing her lover to

accompany her a part of the way on her return. For a moment they waited behind a screening wall—the wall of a peach-house, the air passages of which were on a level (although at the time neither of them of course surmised that it was so) with Percy Elliot's head.

There they bade each other farewell. There the last fond lingering kiss was taken and bestowed, and then Rosamond, stored with the memory of that passionate pressure, and with Percy's vows of eternal love and constancy still ringing in her ears, hurried back to the house, from which she hoped and believed that her short absence had escaped unnoticed by its inmates.

CHAPTER XV.

A FISHING PARTY.

IN the grounds of Hazel Combe, at the distance of little more than a mile from the house there was, as I have elsewhere said, a piece of water large enough to be called a lake. The view both of and from that sheet of water was perhaps the prettiest of which the place and neighbourhood could boast. The trees grew in many places close to the water's edge, dipping their pendent branches into the stream, and mingling with the grey masses of stone which formed the banks, and which were half hidden by their covering of ferns and lichens.

To row and sail upon the lake had always been amongst the favourite amusements of Myles Fendall. The sons of the house had in former days possessed, as their own private property, a boat, which now lay carefully secured under the ivy-mantled boat-house ; but

Myles had early learnt to regard that ponderous, old-fashioned wherry with unmitigated contempt, so his grandfather, ever mindful of the unanswerable, though not always agreeable fact, that boys will be boys, allowed the young gentleman of fifteen, or thereabouts, to build a boat after his own fancy, only stipulating that it should be *safe*, a quality which had on several occasions appeared doubtful to those rash enough to venture on board the "Pandora."

On the evening following Rosamond's secret expedition, it was arranged by Myles and Rica, who were gradually assuming the *attitude* of sovereign rulers in the establishment, that an excursion in the "Pandora" should be enjoyed during Sir Matthew's after-breakfast hour of repose. Hortense had been of course invited to join them, and Rosamond's company seemed expected as a matter of course.

"I would far rather not go," she said. "I have no faith in the 'Pandora,' and still less in Myles's steering."

Rica fired up in a moment.

"What a coward you are," she exclaimed; "and what do *you* know about steering?"

"More than you and I imagine, perhaps,

Rica," said Myles, who was employed in stamping letters at the writing-table, and who glanced at Rosamond to see how his shot told.

He certainly was very fond of teasing his cousin, but there might have been noticed by an acute observer, that many strangely contrasted feelings worked him up to action when his frequently ill-bred remarks brought blushes of shame and anger to Rosamond's brow; for the heiress of Hazel Combe had, during the past few months, rapidly increased both in beauty and attraction. Her dress was more *soignée*, her complexion and her eyes had acquired that singular expression—half languor and half fire—which is unseen in girlish faces before *l'amour, en passant par-là*, has left its burning trace behind.

Then, too, Myles had discovered—*how* no one knew, but he discovered everything—that his cousin, the little girl whom he had sometimes thought of patronising, was no longer heart-whole, and that the lover who had been so audacious as to inspire her with a first passion, was—But this is not the moment in which to reveal Percy Elliot's antecedents, it is enough to know that a portion, at least, of

Rosamond's secret was shared by Colonel Fendall, and, as the reader is aware, he was not one likely to allow such an advantage to escape him unimproved.

He looked, then, with provoking meaning into Rosamond's face, as he said—

“Perhaps you would like to choose your own helmsman, Rosamond. Only take care. We must have a *gentleman* aft, you know, for we are in close quarters on board the ‘Pandora,’ and some may be more particular than others in such matters.”

“What nonsense you are talking!” said Rica, in her authoritative manner; “Rosamond *must* go, or Hortense will refuse; and I want to hear her talk about Laura’s little establishment—very little I suspect it is—a little maid-of-all-work, and a little page.”

“She will turn over a new leaf, perhaps, when Walker has ‘hooked’ it,” said Myles, whose slang always disgusted Rosamond, while his sister laughed as if he had said a clever thing, and again urged Rosamond to give up her mysterious fancy for remaining at home, where, as she remarked, there was nothing *ostensibly* interesting to attract her.

At any time, and even with a conscience

unscared by the consciousness of her deception, Rosamond would have been alarmed and distressed by her cousins' bantering tone. How much the more so then, when the memory of her morning's meeting with Percy Elliot was in its first flush of freshness—when his kiss was still burning on her cheek, while a feeling of regret at the recollection of Percy's avoidance of the subject of his unmerited disgrace lent an alloy of bitterness to the sweetness of the past.

Hoping therefore to arrest the flow of Rica's ironical sayings—Rosamond reluctantly consented to accompany her cousins; and immediately on the arrival of Hortense, who always gladly seized on an opportunity of passing an hour or two with her friend, they sallied forth through the tall fern, and along a little-frequented footpath to the lake's side.

It was a breezeless day, so sailing was out of the question, to the satisfaction, if the truth must be told, of more than Rosamond; for Frederica, bound as she always considered herself to uphold her brother's Crichtonlike merits, infinitely preferred trusting herself to his care on land than adventuring her precious little person on the water with Myles as the

sole guardian of her safety. Hortense, also, who did not scruple to say that Myles *était très peu marin*, saw with considerable satisfaction that the boat's large sail was left on shore, and that the harmless sport of perch-fishing was to be the order of the day.

It would be difficult to imagine stronger contrasts than those presented by the three young girls who, escorted by their scheming relation, bent their steps towards the little pleasure-boat. Even their dress was both varied and characteristic. The French girl, with her dark hair and eyes, her almost yellow skin, which only appeared to advantage in the glare of gas and the less trying *shimmer* of candle-light, was attired with a plainness which was a *coquetterie* in itself. Her looped-up dress was of the plainest *confectionnée* grey alpaca, and her hat, of the same dark hue, was destitute both of flower and plume.

Rica's dress was more what Hortense would have described as *voyant*; there was a prettily arranged bow here, and a little enticing flower, where it would produce the most surely killing effect; the whole being, nevertheless, in unexceptionable taste, and suiting well with the wearer's peculiar style of prettiness.

Rosamond was still, as I have before said, in deep mourning for her mother, and the sombre hues of her long flowing robe became her well. The fair complexion, tinged with the faintest rose—faint and beautiful as the “carnation on a sleeping infant’s cheek”—seemed more delicate still when contrasted by the sombre hue of the suggestive crape; and when a smile chanced to play upon the girl’s rosy lips, and the light of cheerfulness to brighten in her eyes, you were reminded of the blessed truth, that though heaviness may endure for a night, joy cometh in the morning. Yes, the willow-branches may wave above the tomb, but their leaves will be swayed by the summer breeze through which the sun’s rays glance; and though the dark clouds may have gathered for a moment over a stainless sky, they will part, and leave the soft blue ether brighter even, though not more spotless, than before!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE REVELATION.

HORTENSE DE BERNY was well worthy of being the friend and confidante of a pure-hearted girl like Rosamond Fendall. Neither her convent education, nor her glimpses of the exciting secrets of Parisian life, had succeeded in unfitting her for an office so delicate ; and this being the case, she had looked forward to her becoming the safe repository of Rosamond's secrets, as to one of the solaces for the sore disappointment which Laura's elopement had inflicted on her.

It had been a source of sorrow to the warm-hearted Hortense when she began to suspect the existence in Rosamond's heart of a sentiment which *she* was evidently not destined to share. That her cousin's life had been saved by a young man, handsome in person, and one who had already distinguished himself by an act of heroic self-devotion, was certainly a

better reason for falling in love than any of those which Laura could have urged in excuse for her many past moments of weakness. And at first Rosamond had seemed nothing loth to dwell upon the perfections, both personal and mental, of Percy Elliot. But since her visit to Mr. Santland all such rational and natural effusions of a young heart overflowing with gratitude and admiration were at an end, and an entire silence on the subject of the man by whom Hortense could not but believe that her cousin's thoughts were still occupied had grown into a habit between those two tender friends.

Hortense possessed great natural intelligence—an intelligence which had been quickened by her early introduction into a *spirituel* and wit-sharpening society. Her opinion of human nature had not been improved by the observations which she had been led to make upon it, and of her cousin Myles she certainly entertained suspicions far from flattering to the object of them. She believed him capable of any act of treachery or villainy; and she saw in her gentle yielding cousin an unresisting and easy victim to the arts which she foresaw would be brought to bear against her.

To protect poor Rosamond against her enemies, to be her champion and defender, was the secret object of Hortense de Berny's life, and to this end Rosamond had, unsuspected by herself, become the object of her loving and untiring *espionage*.

The bedroom at Hazel Combe which she occupied was next to that of her cousin, and on the morning when Rosamond had promised to meet her lover, it chanced that Hortense, although no secret cares or love-affairs of her own chased the blessing of sleep from her pillow, was wide awake when the great stable clock proclaimed the hour of six, and the bell, as was the custom at that sound, rang out to summon the servants and labourers to their daily toil.

Hortense turned in her bed, and endeavoured to coax back slumber to her eyelids; but the effort was a vain one, for a noise, trifling though it was, in the adjoining apartment, of little footsteps pattering to and fro, kept her wakeful, and she was on the point of springing out of bed in order to ask Rosamond the cause of such unusual activity, when the door of the adjacent room was softly opened, and a light step was heard tripping along the corridor towards the staircase.

The windows of both rooms commanded a view of the flower-garden, and Hortense, true to her self-imposed charge, and moved thereto by a natural feeling of curiosity, threw up the sash and leant out, in the full expectation—although what had given birth to the belief she did not pause to ask herself—that Rosamond Fendall would pass that way, on her road, as Hortense feared, to a more distant spot.

Nor was she deceived in her supposition, for before a minute had elapsed, a dark figure became visible amongst the shrubs and flowers, and Mademoiselle de Berny, the slave of an irresistible impulse, dressed herself in haste, and followed on the path which she had seen her cousin take.

So much of what passed in the early morning hours it has been necessary to relate, in order to account in some degree for the conversation which took place later, in the fishing boat. Hortense had endeavoured on that morning, but in vain, to have a few minutes' private conference with Rosamond. She had gone immediately after breakfast to her cousin's room, and found it empty, and during their progress to the boat she had hung back and

separated herself from the rest of the party, in the futile hope that Rosamond would detect her object, and fall into her views. But, for the first time in her life, the evidently pre-occupied girl seemed desirous to avoid a confidential dialogue with her friend ; and so well did she succeed, that they had reached the lake's shore, and were handed by Colonel Myles into the "Pandora," before Hortense had obtained an opportunity of whispering in her cousin's ear that their gallant attendant had also left his couch betimes, and that whilst Rosamond was keeping tryst beneath the aged orchard trees, *he* was in the adjacent peach-house, watching all her movements, and cognizant probably even of the subject-matter of the words which she had used.

Colonel Fendall busied himself, as in duty bound, in making ready for the sport. He was anxious that the ladies should amuse themselves—"Mademoiselle de Berny would fish, of course, and Rosamond?" No—the latter declined ; she did not care to see the living bait fastened quivering and writhing on the hook.

Hortense exclaimed at Rosamond's objection, for this was the first time that the extermina-

tion of a living creature had formed part of her amusements. "*Ah, mon Dieu, quel horreur!*" she cried. "*Comment!* To amuse yourself, you let wriggle *cette pauvre petite bête pour des heures entières!* *Mais ce n'est pas possible!*"

Myles pacified her scruples. The *bête* should be mercifully knocked on the head, he assured her, before it was a bait at all ; and with this consoling promise the sport commenced.

The ladies occupied the after-part of the boat, while Myles slowly rowed along the lake, keeping near the shore—so near, that as they passed along, Rosamond, with unconscious fingers, plucked the overhanging leaves of the weeping birches which dipped into the peaceful water.

The whole party seemed inclined to silence ; and even Rica, who was usually the most given to loquaciousness, seemed for the moment too much engrossed by thoughts—which perhaps, like most of those that cross our sin-laden hearts, were best hidden in darkness—to have words at her command.

"Mademoiselle de Berny," said Myles, taking out his watch, "would any being in his senses believe that three young ladies, one of whom

has the advantage of being French, could he half-an-hour together, and not a syllable pass between them? If early rising produce such effects as these, it is certainly not a practice to encourage; *et ce n'est pas pécher*, I would have you observe, *que de pécher en silence.*"

"*La péche n'est pas un fruit défendu,*" replied Hortense, hoping to turn the conversation by a pleasantry, and not without a latent hope that Rosamond would take the hint given her, and be—as she so seldom was—upon her guard.

"Perhaps not," said Myles, with a sneer; "I believe that the temptation to our common mother's curiosity (she certainly could not boast of being an uncommon woman) is generally supposed to have been an 'apple.' And Rosamond," he added, suddenly addressing his shrinking cousin, "how about the mistletoe? No want either of provocation or excuse, eh? But upon my word, my pretty one, before committing yourself to such an alarming extent, you would have done well to make *some* inquiries as to character. Why, I wouldn't engage a valet merely for his good looks, while you——"

"Myles!" cried the girl, whose growing

emotion was painful to witness, “you have brought me here to insult me ! Let me go on shore. I will not stay with you !”

“ What, not to hear of Percy Elliot ? ” said Myles ; “ not to listen to some little particulars of this heroic gentleman’s life, which I could impart ? —not to—— ”

“ Myles ! ” exclaimed Rosamond, vehemently, “ I will not hear you speak of Mr. Elliot—or, rather, before you speak you shall hear the truth. You have been a spy upon my actions (why, I know not), and now I fear that my poor grandfather will hear this tale from you with exaggerated and garbled statements. But he *shall* not (the dear old man) believe me guilty of a worse deed than folly, for I myself will tell him that Percy Elliot is my promised husband, and that in meeting him as I did this morning, I believed in my heart that I committed no sin.”

“ I wish you joy,” said Myles, in his cold sarcastic tones, “ both of your lover and your sentiments.”

His heart was beating fast, and his cheek was white with emotion. Rosamond thought it was with anger, and almost shrank from him in fear. She little guessed how much of grow-

ing passion for herself, and what an amount of furious jealousy against the man she loved, blanched his cheek then, and made his words come thickly ! Still, but for a warning, urging look from Rica, he could scarcely have found the bravery within him to give that gentle, loving creature pain.

"I wish you joy," he said ; "but, Rosamond, you must make up your mind to undergo a few mortifications as Mrs. Elliot. I don't mean as a tutor's wife. I don't mean——"

"What *do* you mean ?" cried Rosamond, passionately, and pushing back Hortense's warning hand. "What *do* you mean ? I dare you to say your worst ! For even you—you who respect and love no mortal but yourself—will speak respectfully of the brave ; and Percy Elliot—God be thanked !—need fear no mortal man !"

"He is a good deal changed, then," sneered Myles, "since I had the honour of being slightly acquainted with him. Now, keep your temper, and sit quiet, for the 'Pandora' is what the Irish call 'cogglesome.' It's a horrid thing to hear I know, especially when young ladies happen to be those blind idolaters called hero-worshippers, but the truth is—and all the

world could tell you the same story—that Mr. Percy Elliot, *ci-devant* lieutenant in her Majesty's Navy, and *l'enfant chéri* of Miss Rosamond Fendall of Hazel Combe, is *ni plus ni moins* than a poltroon."

CHAPTER XVII.

HORTENSE TO THE RESCUE.

A DEAD silence followed on the utterance of that hateful word. Rosamond, to her cousin's surprise, kept both her temper and her seat, whilst her tormentor, resting on his oars, and with his eyes fixed upon her face, seemed watching the effect of the means of torture he had invented ; and certainly, had his intention been to witness, with the curiosity of a physiologist, the result on every working feature of the cutting words which he had used, the success of his experiment must have been satisfactory in the extreme.

But Colonel Fendall, remorseless as he had seemed, was not wholly cruel ; and even jealousy—that most powerful and merciless of our evil passions—could not cause him to read unmoved the piteous tale written in that pale face and quivering lip. Like Balzac's stories—every one of which, according to

Goethe, was dug out of a woman's heart—that reading (let us not forget that Rosamond was still almost a child, and very new to sorrow) might have moved the coldest heart to pity ; and even Rica, satisfied for the moment that her brother, acting under her influence, had not erred upon the side of mercy, felt some compassion for the victim of their conspiracy.

Hortense, whose dark eyes were flashing with indignation, could not at first determine how to act ; but a second look at the trembling figure, from which a feeling of delicacy towards poor Rosamond had caused her momentarily to turn away her eyes, showed her that the unhappy girl stood indeed in want of her champion's assistance.

In a moment her arms were thrown round her cousin, and Rosamond's pale face was hidden in her bosom.

“*Du courage, ma clérie,*” she whispered ; “do not let them see that you believe them.” And then aloud to Myles : “ You must row to shore, Monsieur Fendall. Rosamond is suffering ;” and the next moment, feeling a redoubling of the trembling which so alarmed her, she added, in an excited tone, “*Et dépéchez-vous, monsieur, car c'est peu agréable de rester*

en face d'un homme qui s'amuse à torturer une pauvre jeune fille qui ne lui a jamais fait que du bien."

" You do not know what you are talking of, Hortense," said Rica. " I suppose that Rosamond can speak for herself, if she has anything to say; and you must be aware that old and infirm as my grandfather is, it devolves upon Myles to see that no disgrace falls upon the Fendall name; and if——"

But Colonel Fendall's exertions to reach the shore had been so strenuous, that the bows of the "Pandora" were now pressing through the tall weeds which, in the neighbourhood of the boat-house, fringed the margin of the lake.

" Thank God!" exclaimed Hortense, as she assisted Rosamond to land; for she would not allow Colonel Fendall to touch even the tips of her cousin's fingers. " Thank God! And now leave us. You have done mischief enough to-day; and while you are within sight I have no hope of calming Rosamond's distress."

Rica would fain have lingered, but Myles drew her hastily away; and no sooner were their retreating figures lost to view among the trees, than Rosamond, whose tearless emotion,

joined to her almost convulsive trembling, had appeared so alarming to the sympathising French girl, found, greatly to the latter's consolation, a relief in tears.

With the relieving flood came also the natural desire for sympathy; and the moment that the first violence of her emotion had subsided, Rosamond allowed herself the comfort of seeking her cousin's advice in a matter which had so long lain an unshared burthen of secrecy upon her heart.

There were some portions of her story which she found it not wholly agreeable to impart to the prudent, far-seeing, unromantic Parisian; and when she began to enter on the subject of Percy's first letter to herself, the feeling that her lover stood in need of her protection gave her a pang of mortification which almost shook to its foundation the fabric of her love.

“Mais c'est qu'il y a quelque chose de vrai dans les paroles de ce monstre de Myles,” said Hortense; and then seeing the look of pain that passed across Rosamond's face, she added, “But you must see this Monsieur Percy again, *ma chérie*, or you must write and ask him the reason of this shocking *médisance*.”

“I will write,” said Rosamond. “I could

not bear to see him again till this mystery is cleared up. But, Hortense, you who have never loved, you who are so calm and cold, can never dream how terrible will be my torture of suspense."

"And I hope, my darling Rosa, that I may never know such griefs," said her cousin. "From all that my limited experience has taught me, the sorrows of love are far greater than its joys, and it is not your swollen eyes and quivering lips, my Rosamond, which will make me change my opinion. *Mais voyons*. You must not delay in writing to your lover; and, were I in your place, I would tell this *héros incompris* exactly what *le cher cousin* has said of him. *Pardon, ma chérie*"—for the tears were gathering again in Rosamond's eyes, and Hortense feared that her desire *de dése chanter* her cousin by her favourite weapon, *ridicule*, was carrying her too far—" *Pardon, ma chérie, mais il se peut* that it will be necessary for you to forget this Percy. '*La vie est remplie d'oubli*,' and I am seeking to prepare you for the inevitable."

CHAPTER XVIII.

ROSAMOND IS ROUSED AT LAST.

MYLES FENDALL had nearly succeeded in convincing Sir Matthew that Bessie's daughter had been conducting herself—to say the least of it—with a considerable amount of imprudence, when Rosamond crept unobserved to her own dressing-room, and commenced the letter to her lover which was to decide her fate.

She did not, as will readily be believed, dwell upon the turning of her sentences, nor did she weigh the words which she well knew would wound her lover's feelings to the quick. At that moment her only thought was of herself. Her pride had been so sorely hurt. Her fears for herself so suddenly and so violently raised; for might it not be—(she did not wait to *reason*, but the bare possibility threw a shade of egotism over her letter)—that she had stooped to the heaviest of degradations, namely, that of accepting the declarations, and—must I avow it?—the

lover-like caresses of a man, deemed by the world unworthy of its consideration. There was little tenderness, therefore, and little preparation for the intelligence which was to follow, in the opening words of Rosamond's letter ; and when she had, with no concealing or modifying delicacy, repeated to poor Percy the cruel words to which she had been compelled to listen, a softer feeling stole over her, as his image when he would endure the unexpected blow, impressed itself upon her fancy.

" I cannot close my letter," she wrote, " without one word to tell you of my own great grief. One word to assure you that my joy would be exceeding, could I learn that this most terrible accusation is the result of personal enmity, and has no foundation in truth. And Percy, when I think of all I owe to you—my life, and what is more—my awaking to all that makes life precious, I cannot write to you with the coldness which perhaps I ought to feel, nor can I in a moment cast away the love which has brought with it happiness so unutterable—for what will be left to me when that is gone? My Percy! even now I will believe your word. Above even the

voices of an assembled army, I could hear your justification, and if you can tell me, dearest, that this dreadful accusation is a foul base lie—why, I am still your own, and nothing that the world can say shall shake my faith in your true worth and courage."

This letter was sent by Rosamond to the little village inn where, for a few days, Percy Elliot had taken up his abode, and the messenger was desired to wait for an answer. The time seemed long before he returned, and when he made his appearance, he only brought Mr. Elliot's compliments, and an assurance that a reply would be sent in the evening.

With a heavy heart and throbbing head, Rosamond descended to the drawing-room. Hortense was not present to enable her to support with greater courage the ordeal of her first appearance—for Lady Westerham, who had received telegraphic intelligence of the arrival of visitors, had sent to summon her granddaughter to the Abbey; and Hortense, who knew how necessary her presence was considered, had immediately obeyed the summons.

A few minutes' observation was sufficient to convince Rosamond that her offences had clearly been made known to the weak old man, who

was so rapidly becoming, as she feared, a mere tool in her cousin's hands.

"Coward!" she murmured to herself, retaliating upon Myles the offensive word which seemed engraved on her heart in letters of fire; and then, taking advantage of a momentary flash of courage imparted by the strength of indignation, she walked up to her grandfather's chair, and entreated him to hear her.

"I would rather not, my dear," answered Sir Matthew, in a wearied voice. "I am too old for agitations, and it grieves me to think that you should have been acting foolishly. In my day it was not the custom for young ladies to meet gentlemen early in the morning and in secret, but everything is changed, and hardly for the better, as it seems to me."

Rosamond's heart sunk within her as she listened to the feeble tones, and felt that the weakened mind of her kind relation would never be again allowed to receive favourable impressions either of her motives or her conduct. Still, she would not succumb without a struggle, for the pain of losing his good opinion was very great.

"Grandpapa, dearest grandpapa," she said, kneeling down before him, and kissing his

withered hands, “do not turn away from me, you have listened to others—surely you will not refuse to hear my justification ; I have been a foolish girl, I know I have—but—but—my mother is dead—my mother, who would have warned and guided me—and—and I fear that I have only enemies around me.”

The tears were raining from her eyes upon the hands she held, and Sir Matthew, who could not bear to see a woman weep, was leaning forward to bestow a pardoning kiss upon her pleading face, when Rica, who had gradually approached them unperceived, leant over the back of the old man’s chair, and said in her clear, authoritative voice—

“I do not suppose, Rosamond, that much would have been said, if the man had been commonly respectable—but when you know he is a person with whom gentlemen cannot associate—when you know—”

“I know nothing,” broke in Rosamond, springing to her feet, and speaking with eager passion. “Nothing, except that you and Myles are treacherous, cowardly, and mean. No ! I will not stop,” she said, as Myles, coming forward, endeavoured to interrupt her. “It is the first time I have ever endeavoured to

defend myself, but the feeblest creatures will be goaded on at last to battle in their own defence. You were jealous of my grandfather's affection, because—Ah! it took some time to make me see the truth, but my eyes are opened now. You were jealous because you heard that I—I who care no more for money than does that bird which flies across the window—was to be the heiress of Hazel Combe. You will not believe me, probably—you who love power and money with your whole hearts cannot understand that I prize far more dearly one kind look and word from him who used to love me, than I do all the riches which he has it in his power to bestow. I will not have this wealth," she added still more vehemently, and then sinking again upon her knees, and looking up imploringly in the old man's face, she cried—"Grandfather, my own dear grandfather, tell them that I am not the heiress of Hazel Combe, and they will let you love me still."

He laid his hand upon her head, and murmured in a voice which only the girl herself could hear—

"Bessie's daughter! My own poor Bessie's daughter!" and then turning to the others while he reverently removed the black velvet cap which he habitually wore, he said—

"It has been the will of God that my children's children should be orphans: but this one—the youngest—is still more alone; and being brotherless and sisterless, she must find all her missing kindred in the old man whose days on earth are numbered. Leave us, my dears," he continued, addressing Myles and Rica; "I have heard the charge against this child, and it is but right that I should now listen to her justification."

CHAPTER XIX.

PERCY ELLIOT'S EXPLANATION.

PERCY ELLIOT's reply to Rosamond's letter did not reach Hazel Combe till after the family had retired to rest. Had her lover calculated that this would be the case? And had he so arranged that Rosamond should be alone on the receipt of the missive which he well knew she must have been anxiously expecting? If this were so, it was only, as the girl felt, another proof of Percy's thoughtfulness for her feelings —another contrast to the absence of any such refinement of delicacy in those with whom she habitually associated.

Rosamond had begun to feel terribly afraid that she would be condemned to pass a sleepless night of harrowing suspense, when her maid, who had apparently left her for the night, knocked at the door, and Rosamond, on her entering, saw that the woman held in her hand a letter.

With shaking hands—so shaking that they could scarcely perform their office—Rosamond, barely waiting till her attendant had left the room, tore open the envelope, which evidently contained several sheets of note-paper, and read as follows:—

“ At last doubt is over. Certainty has taken its place, and I could almost say, thank God that you are acquainted with the truth. The unworthy concealment which I had almost brought myself to think excusable, so rapidly do we sink when once we have ceased to tread on the firm ground of principle and honour, weighed me down with such a heavy sense of shame, that it required all the consolation of your flattering preference to reconcile me even momentarily to myself. You ask me, Rosamond, if I can refute this calumny, and when I tell you that it is impossible, you will throw this letter down—at least, I fear so—with such contempt and hatred of the writer that the excuses he may urge in his defence will never meet your eye. And yet, although it is the accused himself who pleads his cause—the accused, too, who stands friendless and alone before the judge whose opinion is already formed, and whose mercy for such a crime is

hardly to be hoped for—still being, as you are, a woman, and a woman prone to pity and to kindness, I ask you to read on, and when you have learned all, to judge between me and my accusers.

“When I was a boy, Rosamond—my age might have been fourteen, or thereabouts—I was attacked with an illness to which the ignorant country doctor who attended me could give no name. It came upon me suddenly, and its effect was, as I remember well, to make me tremble at a sound, and shrink with terror from my boisterous school-companions. Previous to that time, I had shown no want of manliness or courage; and when it came to be noised about that I was changed, few would believe at first that Percy Elliot was a coward! What I suffered at that period of my life no one but myself can imagine. The ignominy of my position as the looked-down upon of all those blustering, noisy lads; the absence of any human being who could either comprehend my malady or feel for its effects, all this contributed to make me as miserable a poor lonely boy as ever moped about amongst his fellows, shunned, scoffed at, and crushed down. For many months—months during which, young as I

was, my existence was a burthen to me—I suffered from that most terrible of all known diseases—an entire derangement of the nervous system; and then I gradually recovered to the enjoyment of life, and to the happy consciousness that I was no longer degraded by the ignoble passion of fear. I shall not dwell upon the years which followed—years which I passed in different quarters of the globe (for I entered the Navy early, and as I delighted in my profession, you will believe that I did not disgrace it). At last, Rosamond, I come to the momentous time which was destined to close the professional career of one who had entered the service of his country with high hopes of distinction; and with a love of country and of glory as ardent—at least, I trust so—as that which filled the breast of every sailor in the British Service. To you, who have read, in the happy security of home, the details of those decimating battles, I need recal none of the events which, during one eventful year, made us—the soldiers and the sailors of England—the fortunate objects of eager interest to our countrymen at home. The eyes of the world were upon us, and we did our duty. To me the excitement was—and I say it without

boasting—almost purely pleasurable. I believe that the same strangely nervous constitution which had induced the malady of which I have before spoken, was the cause of my great and, as I have said, unmitigated delight in the struggle in which we were engaged. But all the time that this excitement was in progress, I have little doubt that a return of that dire disease was fermenting within me, and at last I *felt* its terrible approaches! God! how I shrank with horror from myself, when first I knew as a certainty that the symptoms I so well remembered were indeed upon me! How I hated the vile contemptible frame—the mass of ignoble dust which, instead of obeying the impulses of my heart and brain, would—and surely I foreboded it—drag me down into the depths of degradation and disgrace. The moment I felt convinced that my old enemy had found me out, I sought the advice of the surgeon of the Frigate in which I was then serving. He was a rough, and not over-courteous man, accustomed to the coarse, common ailments of the sailors under his charge, but as ignorant of the delicate organisation of the million nerves on the healthy condition of which depend the proper action both of head and heart, as the rudest A.B.

seaman who ever trod a deck. From his opinion I gained no benefit, and I left him with the conviction that when next I should be called upon to act in scenes of danger and of death, the nerves over which I had ceased to have any control would fail me, and I should play a coward's part! And, alas, I was not deceived!

"The moment came. The order was given to clear the decks for action, and I—more trembling and terror-stricken than the weakest woman who ever shuddered at a passing foot-step—knew that I was doomed! Never shall I forget what I endured when, leaning against the poop's bulwark (for my limbs almost refused to support me), I watched the preparations for the approaching fight. 'I shall disgrace myself!' 'I shall have the coward's brand upon me!' 'I shall be proved the most despicable of created beings at the moment when brave and loyal hearts are beating round me, and shall show myself destitute of that commonest of all qualities—the mere brute courage which enables a man to defend himself!' 'If I could but find the momentary bravery to put a pistol to my head and end the struggle!' 'If I could but summon up the resolution to throw myself into the sea which flows beneath the

bulwark against which I lean !' These were among the thoughts by which I was distracted, as, like one suffering from a fearful night-mare, I watched what was going on around me. At last I went below, holding on (how well do I remember each moment of that dreadful hour !) to every passing support which came within my reach. In the cock-pit I knew that I should in all probability find the surgeon, and to him I had resolved to confide the deplorable condition in which I found myself. I had chosen, certainly, a wrong moment for a consultation upon nerves, and, as I might have expected, the doctor was far too busy to attend to my complaints. 'Gad ! if you're ill,' he said, with a manner that looked very like contempt, 'you'd better turn in. Nerves are awkward things in action. Let's look at your tongue. White, and your pulse fluttering like a woman's. Gad ! I believe you're in a *funk* !' Oh, the shame and agony of that moment ! For, alas ! I knew that the rude, brave man spoke nothing but the truth, and that I had lost both the power and the right to hurl his words back in his throat, and kill him for the insult he had dared to offer me. Rosamond, though I have said enough to make you loathe the

memory of the hours when your true woman's hand reposed in mine, and when you gave me, as you vowed, your first and fondest love—though I have done my tardy duty in thus revealing to you the shameful truth—more yet remains for me to tell. *That day's action was fought on board the frigate of which I was an officer, and Lieutenant Elliot was nowhere to be seen upon that vessel's deck!* I was reported ill. Ill during such a fight as that! Ill when the blood of brave men was running like water from their wounds! Ill when the grand roar of guns was thundering in the coward's ears! Have I now humbled myself sufficiently, Rosamond? Methinks I have at last sunk low enough to claim some pity at your hands, and that you will feel for me a little of that commiseration which from men I should but deem an added insult. I was not dismissed the service, for no actual poltroonery could be proved against me; and, besides, I had done the Navy good service in my time, and, strange to say, it was remembered. But, although not dismissed, I was *advised*—quietly, judiciously, and kindly, possibly—to retire into private life. So, here I am, at twenty-five, with all youth's passions strong upon me;

with love burning madly in my veins, and the ashes of ambition and the love of glory unextinguished in my breast. Rosamond, I do believe that, but for this foul blot, you would have loved me with a tender and a true heart, and that happiness such as seldom falls to the lot of mortal man might have been mine. And *must* I give you up, my treasure? For I do love you, Rosamond!—love you with such an entire devotion that, when I think of losing you, the world seems dark, and all the future objectless. But give me one more trial, precious one! Write me one line, and say that I may hope, and you will save a mortal from despair, and hide beneath the shelter of your love his multitude of sins! Yes, dearest, best beloved, the time may come when blood will wash out this stain, which now seems ineffaceable, and then—but, ah! it is too much to hope that your restored affection and esteem may be my crowning glory; and if not so, why you will shed one tear, my darling, when you think upon the distant grave of him to whom you pointed out the way to glory, and whose latest thoughts were of the only woman whom in life he had adored."

Rosamond was deeply touched by her lover's

pleading words, every one of which appeared to her true as those of Holy Writ. She never doubted for a moment that all the past had occurred even as he had painted it; and as for the present, why even the concluding sentence did not appear to her in the light of a *banalité*, so truthful was her own nature, and so limited was her experience of others.

She indited but few words in reply, yet they were sufficient for her purpose.

“ Go ! ” she wrote ; “ the field of glory is still open. Redeem the *misfortunes* of the past, and then, come what may, in life and in death, I am yours, and yours only !

“ ROSAMOND FENDALL.”

CHAPTER XX.

LOVE AND HATE.

AFTER the departure of the Twenty-third Dragoons to the seat of war, Laura, now transformed into the loving, anxious wife of its distinguished Major, returned to spend the period of her temporary widowhood at Westerham Abbey. She was in a terribly tearful state at first, for, as Hortense declared, Nature never had intended her to be the strong-minded wife of a fighting dragoon; but a few weeks sufficed, greatly to the satisfaction of those about her, to reconcile her in some degree to her lot. She was so proud of Cyril, too—her noble Cyril, who was capable, according to her belief, of turning the tide of war in England's favour, the very moment when he should set his foot on Indian soil. And, happily, there were just then several subjects of interest to occupy her mind and imagination, and prevent her dwelling on her griefs. There was poor

darling Rosamond's love-affair. She had heard the whole story from Hortense, and having agreed with her sister on the utter unadvisableness of Rosamond's wasting her affections on Percy Elliot, they entered into a conspiracy to turn the tide of their cousin's affections in some other quarter.

"In the meantime," said Hortense, "the poor child has quite enough upon her hands to make her forget her *engouement*. There are those two old men to watch over—for I believe that Mr. Santland is failing fast—and then it is no sinecure to guard her interests against Myles and Rica. Not that Rosa is much of a guardian—the foolish child, she is too unselfish, too disinterested—and I often fear that they will deprive her both of the old gentleman's affection, and the heiress-ship of Hazel Combe."

That this was likely to be the case was a very prevalent belief in the neighbourhood—nay, to such a pitch of faith did many carry their convictions, that several young ladies, on their promotion, had already commenced covert attacks upon Colonel Fendall's hand and heart. They flattered themselves, with the usual weakness of their sex, that the pretty snares they spread for him were seen only by them-

selves, while all the time the crafty object of their attentions saw through every purpose, and amused himself, first with magnifying his prospects and expectations for their benefit, and then with unmasking their projects for the entertainment of his friends.

Rica greatly enjoyed the little *soi-disant confidences* reposed in her by her brother, while commenting (which was often the case during his *tête-à-têtes* with Rica) upon the various means employed upon his capture.

"And they fancy one is not up to their dodges," he said one day. "Gad! what fools they must think one! What fun it is to see the lengths they'll go sometimes. Now, there is Maud Crutchley—upon my soul she has begun to profess such extraordinary tastes with a view of proving our wonderful compatibility, that I verily believe if I were to express a predilection for standing on my head, she would declare that, give her her choice, she would never practise any other mode of locomotion."

"She is such a vulgar girl," remarked Rica. Myles laughed.

"I don't mean to say that you have brought forward any extra proof of it—but she really is .

—you should have seen her the other evening when we were walking home from Westerham ; she was so dreadfully forward, and as you were not there, she coquetted violently with Mr. Harvey the new curate—you have not seen him yet—leading him on—she had put a glow-worm into her pert little hat—and encouraging the poor parson to say all sorts of things.”

“ Curates are easily encouraged ; but I advise this one to look sharp, for she is a deuced fine girl, and I never in my life saw one more determined to obtain a husband.”

“ Janetta tried very hard with the last parson, and he escaped.”

“ Ah, yes, so he did ; and I remember Crutchley *mère* played into her hands, for she was always being left alone with poor, meek Mr. Fortescue.”

“ True ; but, Myles, you were in the North. I wonder what you go to the Lakes so often for, and I shall find out some day—you were away in the North when Mrs. Crutchley sent the Doctor away to C——. She knows what a marplot he is, so she found a little business for him elsewhere.”

“ ‘ But dismissing the doctor don’t *always* succeed,’ ” quoted Myles ; “ but the best fun, is

the struggle between Jemima's saving propensities, and our dear cousin Maud's sensitiveness about her ankles. 'Take up your petticoats, Maud,' says Mrs. Crutchley, when we are walking together in the mud; while Maud, conscious of what cannot exactly be called her weak point, drops her drapery again the moment the apothecareess is out of sight."

The brother and sister were waiting for Rosamond, who had promised to join them in their afternoon ride. She did not often make a third on these excursions, for besides that she rarely felt in spirits to endure the bantering, *chaffy* talk in which her cousins habitually indulged, she had an instinctive feeling that by one of them at least her society was not desired. Rica always looked *black* when Myles urged Rosamond to accompany them; and Rica's black looks were not as the darkness of a passing thundercloud, but as the gathering of a storm, the effects of which might long continue. Myles was well aware of this; he had often analysed, as it were, the venom which lurked in that little creature's sting; but yet, when it became a question of Rosamond's society, he could not always refrain from running the risk of his sister's displeasure.

He often now found himself, not exactly regretting that he had been instrumental in banishing Percy Elliot and separating him for ever from his love, but lamenting the obligation which had been laid upon him to wound her in a manner so unpardonable. For, as Hortense had truly in her passion said—Rosamond had ever been ready with little offices of kindness, and recollections of her early and sisterly affection were not wanting to fill up the measure of his self-reproach. She was so very true a woman—tender, impulsive, unexacting, and self-sacrificing. So like her mother too—so like the good Aunt Bessie, who, in the days of his boyhood, had ever treated him with the kindness of a mother, while Rosamond—the daughter of that kindly-natured woman—had, from the moment when Rica had made her first appearance at the Combe, behaved to her with the affectionate kindness of a sister. But even in Rosamond's heart, it now appeared that there was room for anger against the man who had trampled with such wanton cruelty upon her feelings; and when the conviction that his gentle cousin could never pardon his offence came home to Myles, he guessed for the first time, that not only her pardon, but her love,

were growing essential to his future happiness.

There could scarcely have been a less comfortable individual (amongst those who apparently have no wish ungratified) than Colonel Fendall. He had grown extremely wearied of his little sister's exigencies, and the reflection that to her was owing his entire estrangement from Rosamond, did not tend to soften his feelings towards her. He was tired also, consummate actor though he was, of always playing a part; and there were moments when even he longed for a true friend to whom he might confide some of his secret and unsuspected sorrows. It was during the continuance of those rare, and better aspirations, that he most felt the worth of his cousin Rosamond's character. Great, indeed, was the change which had taken place in all his feelings towards his cousin, although the time was not very far removed when he had scoffed at her with Frederica as a fool—a dull and unformed fool, with nothing but a little rustic beauty to recommend her, and with no charm of manner likely to counterbalance the disadvantage of her mental deficiencies.

But since the short episode in Rosamond's

life, which had transformed her from a thoughtless child into a loving, passionate woman, every excellence of which she before might boast was increased ten-fold. The timid shrinking which had belied her intellectual powers had passed away, and often Rosamond would, especially when roused by any stinging word from Rica or her brother, reply with a spirit and a quickness which reminded them of her cousin Hortense's lively and petulant repartees. Her beauty also, as I have before said, had of late become wonderfully developed. Her eyes had grown more speaking in their dreamy softness ; whilst her figure, in spite of disappointment and anxiety, had increased in dignity and fulness without losing a particle of its grace.

"How long you have been!" said Rica, pettishly, when her cousin, attired in her riding-habit, came slowly, and apparently regardless of her offence, towards them.

They had been for the last ten minutes standing under the portico, while a groom and helper led the horses to and fro before the door.

"How long you have been! I feel inclined to say, with grandpapa, that in my day it was not considered civil to keep others waiting."

"Especially one's guests," added Myles, who,

besides that he was tormented with a wish to irritate Rosamond, felt no inconsiderable curiosity concerning the present state of her chances as an heiress.

"Especially one's *guests!*!" repeated Rosamond, with a kind of cold haughtiness, which was entirely new to her. "I beg your pardon, Rica, if I have kept you waiting, but I felt rather anxious about my grandfather. I think that he seems weaker than usual. He would not allow me to remain with him——"

"Which of course you would gladly have done," sneered Rica. "I am not so fond of going, as Hortense says, *à quatre pattes*, or I should have made Sir Matthew a similar offer, for I agree with you that he looked ill this morning, and he ought not to be left alone."

"Let us send away the horses," cried Rosamond, eagerly. "And for Heaven's sake, Rica, let us not dispute over that dear, kind old man! We should go hand-in-hand to make his latter days and hours happy! I cannot bear these constant allusions to a succession which——" but her emotion choked her further utterance, and she was almost relieved when Myles said hastily—

"Nonsense! It will only alarm him if we

give up our ride. Here," calling to the groom, "bring Miss Rosamond's horse," and stooping down, he extended his hand to lift his cousin to the saddle. She placed her little foot upon his outstretched palm reluctantly. She did not like the expression of his eyes, and, moreover, Rica's countenance betrayed symptoms of irritation, for Myles was in the habit of attending to *her* comfort first, and jealousy of Rosamond was beginning to embitter many a moment of Frederica's existence. Altogether the excursion did not bid fair to be a pleasant one, and Rosamond would gladly have exchanged her seat on Myrza's saddle for the lowest footstool at the knees of the kind grandfather, over whose wealth her cousins were so unceasingly watching.

They had proceeded for some minutes in silence, when Myles said, gravely—

"This winter seems likely to tell a little on the old people hereabouts. There is my poor grandfather—don't look so indignant, Rosamond—he is nearly eighty, as we all know, and his strength is—to quote your favourite book—little more than labour and sorrow. However, Sir Matthew is, I suppose, certain to go to a happier place; while as for the poor old gentle-

man at the Rectory, upon my word, if report says true, *his* death-bed is likely to be haunted by not a few unpleasant visions—past, present, and to come ! What is your opinion, Rosamond ? You ought to know something of the condition of the poor old sinner's conscience.”

“ You have no right,” broke in Rosamond, angrily, “ to speak with disrespect of Mr. Santland. If only in common gratitude you should forbear. Here in this place, too”—(they were passing the narrow road where Myles' plebeian grandfather had taken vengeance into his hands)—“ in this place where——”

But Myles stopped her in his turn.

“ Well, well,” he said ; “ don't work yourself up to a passion. You will have enough to do if you assume the office of advocate for all the elderly transgressors who are passing from this vale of tears and temptation. What think you of the third party, our excellent ‘ good fellow ’ of a cousin, the noble Earl of Westerham ? He has had a long innings, and will die at last, I am convinced, in the odour of jollity.”

Rosamond did not answer. She was disgusted by the levity of his tone ; and Colonel Fendall, too, grew silent : for he was gazing

with admiration at the girl's flushed cheek and kindling eye; and for awhile the morbid desire which he so often experienced to wound her feelings had subsided.

The established truth that some kinds of love are very nearly allied to hatred, was never better exemplified than in the present state of Colonel Fendall's feelings towards his cousin Rosamond.

CHAPTER XXI.

RICA SPEAKS HER MIND.

"IN the midst of life we are in death." In its midst, and in its morning—in the early budding spring, and when the old year, taking up its "bright inheritance of golden fruits," awaits the coming of the reaper. "The young *may* die, but the old must," was a frequent saying of the aged owner of those far-spreading woods through which his grandchildren were passing slowly, and one of them at least in heaviness of heart; for a presentiment of evil hung over Rosamond, and as every step brought her nearer to the Combe, she felt more and more convinced that evil days were coming upon the house, and that the days of its peacefulness were at an end.

"The leaves are falling very early this year," remarked Myles, as the three equestrians entered the beech avenue which led up to the old Hall. "They are already beginning to rust

under the horses' feet. Last year the trees were greener than this in November."

"Last year?" repeated Rosamond, as if mechanically.

"It has not been an uneventful one, take it altogether," said Myles, approaching his cousin, and laying his hand upon the pummel of her saddle.

She turned her horse's head away.

"If no heavier misfortunes than those by which Hazel Combe has lately been visited fall between this day and the coming of the new year upon the house, I, for one, shall be content," she remarked; and her tone was so cold and distant that Myles felt little inclined to continue the dialogue.

Strange to say, he was beginning to stand a little in awe of Rosamond—a proof of the great utility in some cases of quiet and consistent self-assertion.

It was a damp and dreary autumn evening—one of those evenings in which a leaden pall seems to hang over the atmosphere—checking the flow of cheerful spirits, and filling even the light of heart with dismal and causeless forebodings.

"I wonder how we shall find grandpapa,"

said Rica, as they neared the house. "None the better, I fancy, for the agitation of yesterday. I fear that the hour's *tête-à-tête* which you insisted upon, may have led to a return of his spasms."

"It was unfortunate," rejoined Rosamond, calmly, "that Colonel Fendall should have made that interview necessary."

"Necessary? I cannot understand the obligation. But I believe that it is always agreeable to talk about oneself."

She was goading her impulsive cousin into a confession of the results of that all-important interview, and Colonel Fendall listened with wide-open ears to the reply, which he foresaw might be productive of information.

"Pardon me," said Rosamond, with an effort at the composure which she was far from feeling. "Pardon me, but it *was* necessary, in my opinion, that my grandfather should entertain no doubts of the honour and delicacy of her in whose hands he will leave the respectability of his ancient name; and the charge which, young as I am, I deem a sacred one, of not disgracing the race from which I spring."

"Humph!" ejaculated Rica, while her brother bit his lip till the blood almost spouted

from the pressure. "Humph! you make pretty sure of your succession, Rosamond. But there is an old proverb about the cup and lip—and—"

"Rica!" exclaimed Rosamond, "I have told you more than once how hateful this subject is to me; I cannot bear it. It mixes up money with our love for the kindest and most generous being who ever walked the earth, and whose motives, should he persist in his resolution of making me, his youngest grandchild, heiress to Hazel Combe, will be, even as his life has been, excellent and pure."

"It will not be for *you* to dispute them, certainly," said Rica.

"Nor for you," rejoined Rosamond—"you, to whom he has latterly shown far more affection than he has to me—you, whose opportunities of ingratiating yourself have been far more numerous. But it is shocking to talk in this way," she added, suddenly checking herself. "Pray let us abstain from these recriminations, for in my opinion their bad taste is only exceeded by their wickedness."

As Rosamond ceased speaking they reached the house, and, springing from her horse with a marked avoidance of Colonel Fendall's offered

hand, she preceded them with hurried steps to the small library, where she expected to find the grandfather, whose state of health was causing her so much and such ceaseless anxiety.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LAST WARNING.

HAZEL COMBE was always remarkable for the stillness which reigned within its walls. There were no sudden noises to break the almost oppressive silence. No children's voices echoed through the long passages ; and since the death of Bessie's favourite dog, which had speedily followed that of his beloved mistress, no canine tongues were permitted to give token, in their vociferous fashion, of a stranger's approach.

Accustomed, however, as Rosamond was to this peculiarity in the household, she could not help being struck (it was doubtless but a continuance of her presentiment) with the dead and solemn quiet which reigned around ; and as she softly opened the door of the library, her heart beat still more nervously, for she perceived that the twilight which had stolen quickly upon them out of doors, was almost

darkness in the always dimly-lighted room, and that her grandfather, contrary to his wont, had not yet rang the bell for the shaded lamp, which, at that period of the day, usually stood on the table by his elbow-chair.

She hoped he was asleep, and laid her soft warm hand upon his forehead.

He did not stir, and Rosamond began to feel afraid. It was thus (as she remembered to have been told) that Sir Matthew's venerable mother—the aged ancestress who had died before *she* saw the light—had been seized, when her sum of years was told, and the fiat had gone forth that her soul was required of her. Many a dismal story, too, had been imparted by the nurses of Rosamond's infancy, concerning Lady Fendall's first "seizure," and well did her descendant know that never from that moment had the aged lady thoroughly recovered either the faculty of speech, or her powers of reasoning.

In a moment of time the recollection of the old lady's illness flashed across her mind, and then Rica's sharp voice roused her.

"How dark it is!" her cousin was saying.
"Grandpapa, I had no idea it was so late."
And then, coming close to the chair, she

exclaimed in alarm, “ Rosamond—what is this? Why doesn’t he speak? Oh, grand-papa!” And a sudden suspicion of the truth breaking suddenly upon her, she burst into tears.

Her evident distress roused Rosamond to action, and she rang the bell with vehemence.

“ He is very ill,” she whispered. “ He is awake, and does not speak;” and throwing herself on her knees by the old man’s chair, she chafed his cold hands within her own.

And now all was bustle and confusion where before, even the silence seemed to sleep. No time was lost in sending for Dr. Crutchley, and while awaiting his arrival, every simple remedy known to the Hazel Combe housekeeper was put in practice for Sir Matthew’s resuscitation.

The opinion of the Doctor, who arrived within an hour after the discovery of his patient’s illness, coincided with that already delivered by the experienced Mrs. Watson: and Sir Matthew’s grandchildren were, after a short examination of the sick man’s state, informed that a few days would probably see the termination of that pure and blameless life.

“ Were he a younger man, even by five years,” said Dr. Crutchley, who saw neither

justice nor mercy in concealing the truth—
“ Were Sir Matthew only five years younger, I could see some grounds for hope. But at his age, the organs are too weak to perform more than their ordinary functions, and the effort required for rallying is beyond their powers.”

Rica anxiously enquired if it were likely that he would recover his speech. To do her justice, she grieved sincerely over his state, and for the moment her sorrow almost overcame her fears regarding the Hazel Combe succession.

“ Possibly, but not likely,” answered Dr. Crutchley, who was busily employed in efforts to stimulate his apparently unconscious friend into sensation. “ A few hours, however, will decide that question, and if there be any satisfactory rallying—which I greatly doubt—we may yet keep him amongst us for days and even weeks to come.”

And Sir Matthew did rally—not thoroughly, for he never recovered the full power over his limbs, and his voice remained weak and indistinct. But although it was evident on the day succeeding the attack, that he would never rise from his bed again, or come amongst them as of old, it was a source of exceeding thankfulness to those who loved him, that the aged

sufferer, whose heart had never beat but with kindly and loving feelings towards those who leant over his bed of death, was not destined to leave the world without bidding them a last farewell, and praying for a blessing on those who were soon to see his face no more.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RICA'S MISTAKE.

A WEEK passed away, and Sir Matthew was so far recovered that he could, when propped up by pillows in his bed, talk to his granddaughter Frederica about his worldly affairs. He had never, even when in health, been in the habit of mentioning the word money to Rosamond, and now, a conviction that her tears would flow at the bare mention of the certainty that she would soon succeed to his estates caused him to abstain from paining the grandchild, who, in sickness and at the hour of death, was more dear to him than ever.

But with Rica, affectionate and attentive though she had always shown herself, he had no such fears; and Rosamond having been compelled, by a peremptory order of Dr. Crutchley's, to absent herself for an hour from the sick room, and spend that hour in active out-of-door exercise, Sir Matthew, seized with

a very common old man's fancy to talk about his Will, commenced, as I before said, a discussion with Frederica on his worldly concerns.

"I hope, my dear," he said, in his low, feeble voice, "that it is a just Will. I have endeavoured to do my duty by you all, and if, when I am gone, any should think that I have erred in judgment, may I be forgiven, for I have both desired and prayed that I may do no wrong."

"Dearest grandpapa," said Rica, whispering closely in his ear, "you must not talk of these things now. You will recover; you are so much better that soon you will be downstairs again, and walking on the terrace in the sun."

The old man shook his head—the head on which the long white hair glistened like silver—and a faint smile passed over his features.

"I shall never leave this room again, my dear," he said. "Nay, do not cry! It grieves me to think that I shall be missed, but when (it is more than fifty years ago) my wife, my children's mother, left me in her youth and beauty, it was *here*, Rica—here where I am lying now—I looked forward to the day which is now near at hand, and—do not think it is unkind, my dear, but it would seem like putting

off our meeting longer to go downstairs again. I would rather not, my dear. I hope it is not rebellion against the will of God, but, indeed, I should be best pleased, He willing" (and the old man bent his head reverently) "never to leave this room again alive."

He was silent for a few minutes, and then said in a stronger voice—

"My Will is in that table-drawer, Rica. You will remember to say so when I am gone. I do not think that there can be any mistake; but still, as there is another document—a draft which was made some years before—it may be better, perhaps, to look at both again, and see that all is safe. The key is on my watch-chain. Will you be so kind as to bring the papers here?"

With a strange mixture of curiosity and fear, Rica took the key, and, fitting it into the lock, brought from the drawer in question two slender packets, unsealed and oblong in form, which she laid on the bed before Sir Matthew.

"Thank you, my dear," he said; "that is quite right. The largest (there is not much difference, I think) contains my valid Will. You know, I believe, something of its contents, and that Hazel Combe, with all my landed pro-

perty, is left to Rosamond. I could not do otherwise. There was so much to make amends for; and her poor father's death, which happened long ago, before you were born, I never could forget, so, being as it was, his daughter must inherit Hazel Combe. I hope that you will live with her. I have said so in my Will, and she is a good little girl, and will do as I ask her."

If anything could have aggravated Rica's bitter feelings against her cousin, it would have been this speech of good, simple-hearted Sir Matthew. To be consigned to Rosamond's care!—a pensioner, perhaps, on her bounty!—it was too degrading, and she could hardly bring herself to listen with patience to her grandfather's further explanations.

"I have not much personal property, my dear," he went on to say, "but almost all I have is left between you and your brother—fifteen thousand pounds to you, and ten thousand to Myles. You will not be what is called an heiress," he added, with his kind smile, "but you will not want for any comforts which were in the power of your old grandfather to bestow."

And with such feeble energy as he could muster, he pressed the hand that held his own.

"Dear grandpapa," murmured Rica; but her heart was far more in the Will which lay spread open before her on the coverlid than with the simple-minded, generous invalid who had at various periods of his life, but ever with a true and honest purpose, dictated the contents of those two several sheets of foolscap; for *one* sheet, and *one* only, was the amount of paper contained in each of the envelopes which Rica had brought to the old man's side.

"You can put them both back now, my dear," he said, "and be sure not to forget to say, when I am gone, where my Will is to be found."

Slowly, and with a curious twitching of her finger-ends, did Rica do the old man's bidding. With equal care she folded up and restored to its envelope both the all-important document and the draft, which, being unsigned, was neither more nor less than worthless.

This done, she was about to replace both in the place from which she had taken them, when Sir Matthew startled her by saying—

"I see no reason, my dear, for preserving the draft; it may only lead to confusion, and it had better be destroyed."

"Shall I burn it, grandpapa?" asked Rica,

in a voice which, to any but one whose hearing was impaired, must have seemed changed and hollow.

"If you please," he answered, in a weary tone, as Rica, trembling now in every limb, rose from her chair.

The fireplace was at no great distance from the bed, and she had to pass it on her way to the table, in the drawer of which the Will was to be deposited. A bright and cheerful flame was blazing up from the beech logs which lay upon the hearth ; but as the girl stood there before the genial glow, she shivered, and her face was white as ashes. She held the papers in her hands—her hands that shook as though she were in an ague fit. One of those oblong business-like-looking envelopes was a little larger than the other—a very trifle—but Rica had not failed to notice the difference as she had closed the two on their contents.

Did she remember that slight difference now? Could she be mistaken as to the respective value of those two insignificant-looking and undirected papers ?

There was a momentary hesitation, during which—if that could be—her cheek grew to a still more ghastly paleness. She turned her

eyes towards the bed, and saw that the old man's eyes were closed, and then (it was done very slowly—perhaps she doubted to the last whether or not she was being guilty of a *mistake*) her hand was raised, and the flames, greedily encircling with hungry tongues the paper she had dropped upon the burning logs, reduced it in a moment to a few blackened ashes fluttering to and fro upon the hearth.

Rica did not remain to watch the process of dissolution. She hastily replaced the draft within the drawer, and then, overcome and conscience-stricken, she sunk into the nearest chair. A deadly faintness crept over her, and a cold perspiration bedewed her forehead. "I will not faint," she whispered to herself, but the next moment consciousness had deserted her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MYLES REVEALS HIS SECRET.

RICA remained but a very few minutes in a state of insensibility, and fortunately for her, the person who entered the room as she was painfully struggling back to life was Colonel Fendall. He was alarmed at the condition in which he saw her : for her cheeks—ay, even to her lips, were blanched till they were colourless as the sheets which covered Sir Matthew's bed.

"Heavens ! Rica," he whispered, "you are ill ! What is the matter ? What has happened to distress you ?"

"Nothing," she gasped ; "don't speak to me. I fear I have made a terrible mistake. You shall hear it all, when I am better able to reply."

He took the hint, and sat down quietly beside the bed, while his sister, the moment she felt

strong enough to stand, glided silently from the room.

He was very impatient to learn the cause of her sudden indisposition. She was so little addicted to feminine weaknesses of that inconvenient description, that he was convinced something of importance had occurred which would, on investigation, account for such an unwonted evidence of emotion.

To make any enquiry of Sir Matthew was out of the question, for in the first place, the venerable patient was to all appearance asleep, and in the next, the most perfect quiet and freedom from agitation were enjoined, as being essentially necessary to his recovery.

There was nothing to be done. He could not leave his grandfather alone : added to which something in Rica's manner had warned him to be cautious, so Myles, agitated though he was with mingled feelings of curiosity and alarm, remained where he was, a most unwilling guardian of the sick man's slumbers.

At last—he had not been there thirty minutes, but they had passed like hours to the unwilling prisoner—the door was softly opened and his cousin Rosamond stole on tiptoe to the bedside.

A common sorrow had apparently united the relations who had so lately been at variance. The angry flush had faded from Rosamond's eyes, when she addressed the cousin who had given her such cause for anger, and Myles, subdued, and to all appearance humbled, seemed divided between anxiety for their dearly loved grandfather, and an endeavour to earn Rosamond's forgiveness by his gentle attention to her every wish.

"Has he slept long?" she whispered.

"I cannot tell," was the low-toned reply.
"He was lying as you see him when I relieved
Rica from her watch an hour ago."

He rose as he spoke, and after a few kind words expressive of anxiety both for her health and Sir Matthew's, he left the room.

Rica, after her hurried exit from her brother's presence, had taken refuge in her dressing-room—a prettily furnished little boudoir which joined her sleeping chamber—she well knew that *there* her privacy would not, except by Colonel Fendall, be disturbed; and till his arrival, which she was certain would not be long delayed, she spent a terrible half-hour in close commune with her fears. She had no hesitation as to the line of conduct to be pursued

with regard to her brother. She would repeat word for word her conversation with Sir Matthew, and then—why it was only a *mistake*. She had thrown, through inadvertence, the wrong paper into the flames, and as matters at present stood, she, instead of the envied, hated Rosamond, was the heiress of Hazel Combe.

But was it likely that Myles, whose wit was so keen, and who was ever suspicious of even an apparently virtuous motive—was it likely, I repeat, that Myles would put even a moment's faith in her clumsily devised falsehood? To do her justice, Rica never imagined that she could deceive him into the belief that she had unwittingly destroyed her grandfather's will and testament. It was better, however, in her judgment, and would be far more agreeable to herself, to keep up an appearance of right-mindedness; added to which, well as she knew her brother, she still felt in some degree uncertain as to the light in which he would view her conduct.

These thoughts were working within her, and so sorely was she troubled by the possibility of future discovery, that she was beginning to regret her deed of treachery, when she heard

her brother's step in the corridor, and in another moment—with the ceremony of knocking—he was in the room.

Colonel Fendall drew his favourite chair closer to the fire, and after making himself thoroughly comfortable, looked to his sister for an explanation.

Rica was seated on a low *prie-dieu* in front of him. Her seat was far less luxurious than that which Myles had chosen : for, fond of ease and self-indulgent though she was, sisterly affection reigned predominant, and Myles' comfort was ever her first consideration.

"Are you sure, dear, that you are not cold?" she asked tenderly, as he crouched over the fire. "Shall I put on another log?"

But Myles declined the attention.

He was "All right," he said, "and only anxious to hear what his sister had to tell him."

He neither looked up nor spoke while Rica detailed the events which had taken place. She began from the beginning—informing him of the provisions of the Will, as specified by Sir Matthew, and also of the existence of the useless draft which had so long lain beside it in that secret and undreamt-of repository.

"And then?"

But here she hesitated.

"And then?" repeated Fendall, slowly lifting his keen eyes to hers.

"Then, Myles, it was that I made the stupid mistake I told you of. I cannot imagine how it was: the papers were so very much alike that at first——"

"Bosh—go on," said Myles, roughly.

Rica was roused. Her temper was, as the reader may be aware, none of the most pliable, and Myles' tone angered her.

"Well, if you *must* know," she said, "I burnt the wrong one. It was a dreadful thing to do, but I could not help it, and you need not be so savage."

"Rica!" exclaimed Fendall, starting up, and speaking with angry vehemence, "you must have been mad to do it."

"Mad?" she repeated, with provoking coolness; "did not I tell you it was a mistake?"

"A mistake! What cursed humbug! Rica, you must undo the mischief you have done. Sir Matthew must be told of your—your error, it may be called. And he must make a fresh Will, or I am a ruined man."

"Ruined! Myles—what can you mean?

Do you not understand that I am heir-at-law to all the landed property ; and”—she added, laying her two hands upon his arm, and looking up in his face with the devoted love which in part excused her crime—“ and will not all that I possess be as your own ? ”

He could not see her pleading face unmoved.

“ My poor Rica,” he said, “ I have been your worst enemy, and the time may be not far distant when you will reproach me for the ruin I have brought upon you.”

“ Never ! ” she said. “ Do what you will—say what you will, I will never accuse you of harming me. What you command I will, as far as lies in my power, endeavour to accomplish, and——”

“ Then,” he said, with a suddenness of acceptance for which she was unprepared ; “ then if you are so willing to obey me, go at once and do what I require. Say to Sir Matthew, as you have said to me, that it was a mistake, and, ill though he is, he may make another Will again, and the evil may be repaired.”

“ I cannot. Do not ask it, Myles. It would seem so strange—he would never believe me.”

“ You expected more credulity from me,” he said bitterly.

"And, besides," she continued, not heeding the interruption; "what, as I said before, is a paltry ten thousand pounds, when we shall have nearly that income yearly?"

"You may never benefit by your position as heiress at law. I mean——"

"What do you mean, Myles? There used to be no secrets between us, but now you speak in riddles."

"I mean, dear," he rejoined, apparently recollecting himself, "that you are only eighteen, and powerless in the law's eyes for three long years to come. But, Rica, this is nonsense. There are reasons—grave reasons—why the Will you have destroyed must still stand good, and if you will not follow my advice in this matter, I must take it into my own hands, and act as I shall consider for the best."

For a few moments Rica remained silent, watching his countenance as he stood in a thoughtful attitude, leaning his shoulders against the chimney-piece.

Apparently she had gathered some inspiration from his moody face, for she exclaimed abruptly—

"Myles, I would stake my existence on the fact that you have a secret hidden from me—

from me who, since I saw the light, have been open with you as the day—from me who, from the moment when you taught me to say your name, have loved you so entirely—Myles—my Myles,” she said, throwing her arms round him, and sobbing on his bosom, “I have only you, dear—only you to love, and if you desert and abandon me——”

“ Foolish child !” he said, soothingly, for the remainder of the sentence she had begun was rendered inaudible by her emotion. “ Foolish child ! You do not know what you ask—you are begging for a confidence which would make you hate me, and—God knows—I might soon reciprocate the feeling.”

“ Then there is a secret,” she cried, passionately. “ I knew it—I could have sworn it ! Myles, I will not endure this, and if you hesitate to reveal it, why I will denounce myself as the fraudulent consumer of that Will, and——”

But Fendall stopped her ere she could finish the threat which she had commenced, for passion had taken the place of compassion, and he was beginning to feel far less for her than for himself.

“ You would rather know it, would you ?” he asked, in his coldest and most sarcastic

tones. "Remember, if my news bores you, that you have no one to blame but yourself. I give you five minutes to make up your mind."

"Not one," the girl said, vehemently. "You have kept me waiting too long already, and your insolence is more than I can endure."

They were well matched both in temper and determination—that brother and sister, who for years had seemed all-in-all to each other; but Myles, in the possession of his secret, had the upper hand now, and for a few moments longer he kept her in suspense.

"Oh! speak, Myles—speak!" she pleaded. "You had not used to be so cruel;" and again she laid her hands upon his shoulders, and raised her small tearful face to his.

He threw his arm round her, and dried her long wet lashes with his lips. Then it was that he whispered in her ear the secret she had prayed to learn; while, as she listened to his words, every limb grew rigid as though catalepsy were creeping over her frame.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RECTOR HAS FOREBODINGS.

THE absences of Mr. Santland from the Rectory had latterly been both long and frequent. He had obtained a large amount of sick leave from the Bishop, and had profited by it to the extent of going abroad, and endeavouring, by entire change of air and scene, to recruit his health and spirits.

Towards the latter end of August he had left Combe Hatton with the intention—which he had carried out—of spending two months in Switzerland. He had returned a few days before Sir Matthew's illness, and had paid more than one visit to the old friend who had received him with all the kindness of former days.

Rosamond was grieved to perceive but little change for the better, either in the Rector's outward appearance, or in the tone of his mind and nerves. Always thin and spare in person,

he had arrived at a degree of emaciation painful to witness. His bones, as Colonel Fenda remarked, seemed to rattle in his skin, and in his voice there was a hollow and a cavernous sound, as though it issued from a tomb.

But what most distressed Rosamond was the increase of that absence of interest in passing events, which had always struck her as a sign of evil augury. She had felt it to be her duty previous to his departure, to make him acquainted with the breaking off of her engagement to Percy Elliot. A year ago—even six months before—she would have done more than reveal to him the simple fact that she was free. *Then* she would have been certain of his sympathy. *Then* she could have relied upon his advice; but now, so broken was he, and so weak in frame and spirits, that their relations to each other seemed reversed; and the girl had grown to be as the feeble staff of him on whom she had so lately leaned for protection and support.

On the afternoon when the important event recorded in the last chapter was in progress, Rosamond had taken advantage of her hour of liberty, and had hastened to the Rectory, where that other failing denizen of a world he was so

soon to quit required a large portion of her attention and her care.

Mr. Santland, when she reached the Rectory, was, as usual, walking restlessly along the weed-covered walks of his neglected garden. His hands were clasped behind his back, and his eyes bent upon the ground. He brightened up a little at Rosamond's approach, and seemed pleased, when, in answer to his inquiries, she spoke of the good night's sleep which Sir Matthew had enjoyed, and of the consequent improvement announced by Dr. Crutchley in his symptoms.

But pleased as he had appeared to welcome his visitor, the Rector soon began to exhibit strong tokens of a desire for her departure.

"I fear you are neglecting your grandfather for me," he said. "You are leaving him too long alone, and he may miss you before you can return."

"He will not, sir," said Rosamond, who felt rather chilled by his evident wish to be rid of her.

"He will not, for my cousin Rica is with him, and she understands his wants and wishes even better, I think, than I do."

"Yes, foolish child," rejoined Santland;

"you have allowed her opportunities for studying them, which no one but the silly unsuspecting daughter of a guileless mother would have permitted. And even now—now at the eleventh hour—when everything may be at stake——"

"Everything? Oh, dear, dear sir," said Rosamond, sadly.

"Well, well; we will not speak of worlds to come, when we have all so much at stake in this. You know, my child, how much depends on your inheriting this fortune. You have not now to learn that the man who holds my character in his hands, will show no mercy if he be not paid the uttermost farthing of his vile exactions; and yet you leave that scheming and unscrupulous girl to play upon an old man's feelings, and coin money out of his weaknesses."

"I think you wrong my cousin, sir. She has no thoughts now but those of sorrow for my grandfather, and, besides——But it is too painful to be counting on his money before the dear old man has ceased to breathe; besides, I have heard from my grandfather himself, that his Will—the Will about which you are so anxious—is already signed and witnessed, and

deposited in a table-drawer quite near his bed. Be easy, then, dear sir," she added, as she rose to go, " and be sure that in so far as it depends upon the exertions of Rosamond Fendall, you will be safe from the persecutions of that cruel grasping man."

After she had left him, she pondered sadly on the decay of those mental powers which had once seemed able to defy alike the assaults of time and the undermining ravages of care. Many and most melancholy are the spectacles which in this grief-fraught world are ever reminding us of the instability of all terrestrial things! Sad is it to see a goodly forest-tree which has stood for centuries against the storm, reduced to a shattered trunk, branchless and decaying. Grievous is the sight of a dismasted ship which once rode proudly over the foaming billows. Pitiable is the spectacle of vanished beauty, and of manly strength departed. But more deplorable and soul-stirring than all these together, is the decline and fall of a grand human intellect, and the ruin of a mind over which he who possesses it has ceased to mourn!

" Better, almost," thought Rosamond, as she slowly wended her way homeward, " had he

been taken years ago, and when his heart and mind were capable of receiving the impressions of those things which belong to our salvation. Now, unless He who is mighty to save should stretch forth His hand, they will, I fear, be hid from his sight for ever!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

FALLEN ASLEEP.

WHEN Sir Matthew awoke from the lethargic slumber in which on her return Rosamond had found him, the early twilight was beginning to shroud the room in darkness. Fearing to disturb the sick man's repose, she had allowed the fire to burn low upon the hearth, and now only a few smouldering embers occupied the place where the flames had lately burned so brightly.

A faint voice murmuring the name of "Rica" warned Rosamond that her grandfather was awake, and drawing aside the curtain, she asked him if he would like to see her cousin.

"No, my dear, thank you—not just now," he said, but in tones so low that Rosamond could only catch their import by placing her ear almost upon his mouth. "Rica was here before I slept, for I have had a blessed slumber. God is very good to let me pass away so painlessly."

The girl checked her rising tears, and inquired, while she pressed her lips lovingly on his white hair, whether she should read to him.

He would like it much, he said. So Rosamond rang the bell for lights, and stirring up the expiring fire, made ready for her task.

She had read only a few verses of one of her grandfather's favourite Bible chapters, when he interrupted her by a request that she would send for Mr. Santland.

"It is late, I believe, and cold," he said—for even in illness his consideration for the comfort of others never forsook him—"it is very late and cold, I am afraid, so you will be so good as send the carriage. I shall not be long amongst you, Rosamond, and my old friend will not refuse to come. I have to ask his pardon, dear, for I would gladly die at peace with all the world."

A sharp pang darted through Rosamond's heart as she proceeded to do his bidding. She felt, and truly felt, that Death's rude plough-share was turning up the soil, and that soon she would be without her truest earthly friend. Moreover, there was little comfort in the thought that by him over whose want of religious faith

she had so often mourned, the last consoling offices of the Church would be administered. Fain would she have suggested that another and a more fitting minister of the Gospel should be selected to fulfil the sacred duty, but she had not the heart to harass her dying grandfather by doubts so painful, and therefore all was done, and that speedily, as Sir Matthew had requested.

Only Rosamond was present when the friends who had grown old together exchanged the words of repentance and forgiveness. The Rector was deeply moved by the contrition of the dying man, who blamed himself for his injustice; and thanked him in his own simple way for the blessing which in his Bessie he had bestowed upon him.

After the interview had lasted for a few minutes Sir Matthew expressed a wish to see his other grandchildren, and Rosamond left the room to summon Myles and Rica to his bedside.

The brother and sister had heard with dismay of the Rector's arrival, and Myles, seeing in it an event of sinister meaning, had not ceased to urge upon Rica the necessity of explaining to Sir Matthew her fears that in the agitation of

the moment she had mistaken the value of the papers, and had committed his last testament to the flames.

Rica had ceased to refuse, but she asked for time.

"To-morrow," she said, "I will humble myself—to-morrow I will stand before the world the degraded thing which my love for you has made me."

Even when following Rosamond along the corridor which led to the sick man's room, Myles continued to impress upon the agitated girl the necessity of an immediate explanation. And it was not till they stood together beside the bed of their aged relation that there was silence between them.

In a few simple words Sir Matthew informed all present where, when he should lie beneath the sod, his last testamentary dispositions would be found.

He did not wish his Will, he said, to be opened till after the funeral—the funeral which was to be simple and unpretending as the life of him whose dust was soon to be mingled with the dust which perisheth.

His voice grew feebler as he spoke, and Myles, leaning forward, entreated him to defer

till to-morrow the injunctions which he had yet to give.

Then it was that a change, which would have been perceptible to any whose lot it had been to stand often by the bedside of the dying, came over that venerable face. The eyes seemed to dilate, and a slight convulsive movement stirred the covering on his chest.

"To-morrow," he repeated, and his voice appeared to have recovered a momentary strength. "Children, remember that to-day only is ours. Let us work while it is called to-day," he murmured, "for we know not what a day or an hour may bring forth."

Myles whispered a few words in Rica's ear, but she waved him from her with an impatient gesture. Then his lips opened as if to speak, but his sister laid her hand firmly upon his mouth. In the dim religious light of that chamber of the dying none surmised the base earthly passions by which those two were moved—for the aged pilgrim leaning on the staff of his most holy faith occupied the heart of Rosamond, and the mind of the Rector was solely dwelling on his departing friend.

Suddenly a faint cry broke from Rosamond, and then, looking upon the face of him whose

very moments on earth were numbered, all present saw that the hand of Death was on him.

Too late was it now for explanation of the past—too late to provide for the exigencies of the future—for even before those present could realize the change, the heart of him who held their fortunes in his hands had ceased to beat, the ear to hear, and the brain to comprehend.

Prepared as all present had been for the fatal termination of Sir Matthew's illness, the fact of his dissolution came upon them with the force of a sudden blow. At first they could not bring themselves to believe that the voice which had so lately addressed them in words of solemn warning was hushed for ever, and it required the evidence of Dr. Crutchley, who arrived a few minutes later, to convince them that they would see no more alive the face of that kindly Christian friend and relative.

When the last sad offices had been performed, Rosamond entreated to be left alone with the dead. Humbly she knelt beside the melancholy remnants of mortality, and with meek fervour did she pray for strength to do her duty. With childlike trust did she place herself in the hands of Him who alone is mighty

to save both in the hour of death and in the day of trial ; entreating that she might be enabled to walk in the steps of him, who had made his conscience a guide unto himself—whose hopes had been fixed on heaven, and whose good works would live after him, while his ashes were mingling with the dust which perisheth.

Not many minutes had she remained upon her knees, when Mr. Santland, followed by the Doctor, re-entered the room with noiseless foot-steps.

They did not disturb the loving grandchild weeping by that bed of death, but the Rector, taking the watch and keys which hung above the head of the deceased, proceeded, with the assistance of Dr. Crutchley, to affix the seal of Sir Matthew's coat of arms to the drawer in which, as he had informed them, his Will was lying.

This done, and keeping possession of the watch and its appendages, they left the room as silently as they had entered it.

But the Rector, as with lowered head he turned from the sad spectacle, had he no fears at that solemn moment for himself ? Had *he* no hope, and did he breathe no prayer that he

might die the death of the righteous, and that his last end might be even as that aged Christian pilgrim's? Alas! I fear me not, for he had had eyes and would not see, and now in darkness and in misery he went groping on his way, calling in vain for the light which seemed as though it were for ever hidden from his view.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE OPENING OF THE WILL.

THE funeral obsequies of the last Sir Matthew Fendall of Hazel Combe were, according to his dying request, conducted without ostentation, and with as much privacy as was compatible with the high esteem in which he had so long been held.

The week that elapsed between the death and burial was very trying to Rosamond. She spent the greater portion of the time in the darkened chamber where the remains of her beloved relation—cold, mute, and stiffened into the clay to which he had returned—lay waiting for the hour when they would be hidden for ever from her view.

Long, but not stormy, had been the battle of the good man's life—past was the alarm, the struggle, and the strife; and soon, restored to her who had been snatched from him in her

early matronhood, he would sleep beside his mourned one in the grave.

Hortense came daily from the Abbey to spend a few comforting hours with her friend. Hers was exactly the character to be of use and benefit on occasions such as this. She did not arrive with lengthened face and muffled footsteps, but, on the contrary, she brought into that gloomy house a refreshing breath of outer air, and a wholesome memory of every-day external doings, which, combined with her true feminine sympathy and tenderness, were of infinite service to Rosamond.

“*Il faut serrer les rangs,*” she said, when the poor girl was lamenting over the loss of him who stood first and dearest amongst her few friends. “When *one* is removed, we have but to stand closer, and fill up the gap that has been made.”

Rosamond and her cousins met as usual at their daily meals—those dismal meals which the exigencies of our nature and the autocratic laws of habit require us to continue even in the dreariest hours of our lives. Silence and reserve reigned between those near relations during the comfortless hours which they spent together, and Rosamond, absorbed as she was

by other thoughts and memories, could scarcely avoid noticing that a kind of embarrassed *distance* had usurped the place of the former affectionate and demonstrative intercourse between Rica and her brother.

At last the day arrived when the honoured remains of the good Sir Matthew would be removed to the burial-place of his fathers ; and at an early hour in the morning a dense crowd had assembled in the park, each man and woman of whom that assemblage was composed being anxious to pay a last tribute of respect to the memory of their departed friend and landlord.

A bright winter's sun (for the morning had been ushered in by a sharp frost) shone upon the coffin, as, borne upon the shoulders of the most attached amongst the old retainers, it was conveyed with solemn steps and slow along the path which led across the park towards the old church of Combe Hatton.

A brisk wind blew in the faces of the mourners, raising the heavy velvet of the pall, waving aside the streaming hatbands of the bearers, and from time to time leaving exposed to view, as their crape veils were lifted by the breeze, the pale faces of the two weeping girls,

who followed with bent-down heads close behind the coffin of their grandsire.

Many were the tears shed by those who thronged around the burial ground that day. The widow mourned for him who had been her friend and benefactor in her hour of trial, and little children kneeling near the open grave, raised their clasped hands in memory of him who had for many years been a father to the fatherless.

When the last solemn words were said, and the last blessing given—when they had laid him in that “doorless house,” where all is dark within, and of which “death holds the key,” then Rosamond rose slowly from her knees, and looking round upon the mourning crowd mentally repeated her fervent prayer that she might be enabled, as far as in her lay, to do her duty by those whom it had pleased Providence to place under her care.

The merry sunlight streamed in through every southern window of the Combe, when the mourners, returning from that solemn ceremony, came “back to busy life again.” It had been arranged that at two o’clock the Will should be opened, and also that those whose presence was required on the occasion should

meet, in the first instance, in the room where the testator had breathed his last.

It was a spacious apartment, and the bed being in a species of alcove or recess, it had little the appearance of a sleeping chamber. One by one, Rosamond being the last to make her entry, did those arrive who were bidden to the ceremony. They were few in number, consisting only of the three grandchildren of the deceased, the family lawyer by whom the will had been drawn up, Mr. Santland, Hortense de Berny, and Dr. Crutchley.

Added to these, but hardly *of* them, were two of the upper servants—namely, Mrs. Watson, the housekeeper, and Sir Matthew's grey-haired valet. These two sat a little apart from the rest, awaiting in grave silence, and with watchful eyes, the progress of events.

Perhaps Rosamond was the only individual present who could with truth have avowed that she felt neither anxiety nor curiosity as to what was to follow. She had grown up with the fixed impression on her mind that she was the heiress of Hazel Combe. Her grandfather had never varied in his assertions that so it was to be; and she, in common with all the world, put faith unchangeable in Sir Matthew's word. So

the heiress expectant, although deep sorrow was written on her countenance, leant back in her chair, composed and tearless—a marked contrast to her cousin Rica, who, sobbing with apparently uncontrollable emotion, concealed her face from all present with the handkerchief which was pressed upon her eyes.

The lawyer, as became one of his profession, was a serious man. He had worked hard and to good purpose in his vocation, giving several more than the allotted “seven hours to law,” and earning thereby a comfortable independence for his only son, who was now installed at Combe Hatton as Mr. Santland’s curate.

This serious lawyer, attired in his suit of sables, white-cravated, and with golden spectacles on nose, proceeded, when all the company were seated, to break the seals which had been placed by the Rector upon the sacred spot where lay the all-important Will.

This done, the drawer was slowly opened (they had time before them, and the occasion was a solemn one), and then Mr. Harvey could perceive lying there, like any other common and insignificant document, the envelope which he well remembered.

Unsealed it was, and undirected, even as Sir

Matthew had desired it might remain, when he—the lawyer—offered to place it in the safe custody of his “office.”

For a moment, the worthy man felt a slight emotion of contempt for the unbusinesslike habits of his late client, and then taking up the document, he opened it reverentially before the assembled company.

All eyes—even those of Frederica—were fixed upon him as *his* glanced over the closely written page. He did not speak, but turned it over with a hand which did not show one sign of agitation, and with a face unmoved and undecipherable as the most complicated sheet of parchment which ever emanated from the “office.”

He was not a man likely to hurry himself, and he took his time even when, thrusting up his gold spectacles to the utmost limit of his forehead, he said, looking round upon the wondering faces near him—

“This is an extraordinary business. There must have been some unaccountable mistake; for this paper,” and he again opened wide the drawer, and gave to view its emptiness, “this paper is the only one I see before me, and *it is not the late Sir Matthew Fendall's will!*”

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HAZEL COMBE CHANGES MISTRESSES.

THEN began the search, which *two* persons present knew for certain, and more than one suspected, would be useless. Then did the Rector almost curse the hour when Frederica Fendall came to cheat his grandchild of her inheritance, and then did Rosamond—for she was far from being the faultless monster which the world ne'er saw—begin to fear that another than herself might fill the place of him whom they had lost.

For hours—ay, for days—did that fruitless search continue, and then the unwelcome truth forced itself on the minds of many, that Colonel Matthew Fendall's daughter' was the heir at law, and that their favourite Rosamond's good fortune had deserted her.

To describe Mr. Santland's feelings during the period when he still allowed himself to *hope*, would be impossible; so complex were they,

and so tossed about was his already weakened mind by torturing passions. For a time he bore up bravely against his fears, but when suspense was over, and when even the most sanguine had ceased to entertain even the faintest expectation that the missing Will would be recovered, then the unhappy old man sank into a state of mental depression painful to witness.

It was in vain that Rosamond, making light of her own grievous disappointment, repeated to him, again and again, that her share of the personality, which amounted to twelve thousand pounds, would more than enable her to pay his long-standing debt to his relentless creditor. It was in vain that she repeated to him her conviction that, even as a matter of right, Hazel Combe had descended to its natural owner. He refused to be comforted, often, indeed, refused to listen to her arguments, and, what pained her most of all, heaped reproaches on the memory of the dead who had, as he affirmed, been false to his promises, and a deceiver even from the beginning.

But notwithstanding, and indeed in some measure because of the Rector's miserable state of mind, Rosamond resolved, when her fortunes

were no longer doubtful, to take up her abode at the Rectory of Combe Hatton. Near that poor, solitary old man she decided was her rightful place—rightful, because of her dying mother's wishes—rightful, because of the deep pity for him which welled up in her breast.

Hortense de Berny endeavoured, but without success, to turn her friend from her purpose. She pointed out to the self-sacrificing girl the various *désagréments* of a residence with that gloomy, *maussade*, old man.

“And Rosa, *ma bien aimée*,” she said, “you will be lost there—*introuvable*. It is well for me, *puisque je me suis rangée parmi les vieilles filles, de rester au coin du feu, soignant mon pauvre vieux grandpère, mais toi, dont le cœur a parlé—toi qui trouveras tôt ou tard un adorateur pour te faire oublier ce pauvre infortuné de qui nous n'entendons plus parler—toi——*”

“My dearest Hortense,” broke in Rosamond, “if you will not dream dreams and build castles for yourself, at least do not take the useless trouble of elevating your poor harmless cousin into a heroine. I am well satisfied as I am, grateful too, I trust, that I have still some active duties to perform; and, above all, thankful that I do not fret and grieve as much as I

feared I should over my changed position. We shall be very near each other, dear ; and if I have not been able to accept your kind, good grandmother's offer of a home, I shall I trust have many an opportunity of proving to you all that I am not ungrateful."

The final settlement with the usurious Mr. Earnshaw, and the making over to him of almost the whole of Rosamond's small fortune, was conducted with so much secrecy and discretion, that the world of Hillingstone and its neighbourhood never suspected that Sir Matthew's favourite grandchild possessed only just sufficient income to place her in a position of independence : and when, shortly before her departure from the Combe, she dismissed her maid Holland, on the plea that at the Rectory she would have no occasion for the attached woman's services, that act of self-sacrifice failed to suggest to the gossips of the neighbourhood an idea of the truth.

But in spite of all her prayed and hoped-for resignation, it was a bitter moment to Rosamond when she bade farewell to the home which she had so long looked upon as her own. Both Myles and Rica had—to do them only justice—tried their utmost to change her reso-

lution. To both, her remaining at the Combe was in many respects desirable ; but especially so, from the undeniable fact, that many persons viewed the brother and sister with suspicious eyes, and that since the report of "Miss Rosamond's" approaching departure had been bruited about, cold and averted looks, and scarcely respectful salutations, had been the portion of Rica and her brother when they had walked or ridden beyond the immediate precincts of the Combe.

Then also, they could not but feel some sensation of remorse when Rosamond's pale patient face reminded them of their treachery. Not that Rica would admit either to herself or her confidant that her act in destroying the will had been *unjustifiable*. She repeated again and again her old argument, that Sir Matthew had had no right to deprive her of her birth-right—no right to put it out of her power to provide with the liberality which was his due for her father's son.

And Myles, while he moodily listened to her perverted reasonings, was he *quite* convinced that he was blameless in thus aiding and conniving in her fraud? Or did he (while he felt his former passionate admiration for his cousin Rosamond redoubling whilst noting her brave

Christian resignation) hesitate to retain the possessions which by treachery had been wrested from her hands ?

Rica, who watched her brother narrowly, sometimes feared that remorse might lead him to an act of restitution, which she looked upon as madness ; and it was this well-grounded alarm which modified the fervour of her entreaties to her cousin that the latter would make Hazel Combe her home.

The last morning at length arrived. It was a month after Sir Matthew's funeral, and to Rosamond the thirty days had seemed a century, when she—with tearless eyes, but with a heart wrung with the grief which pride enabled her to conceal—took her way through the little flower-garden, and, without a spoken farewell to any, walked slowly along the well-trodden footpath to the Rectory.

Rica was touched for the moment when she found that Rosamond was really gone, but she soon recovered her cheerfulness and equanimity, for Miss Fendall's flashes of admiration for self-sacrificing acts might be counted by instants, whilst her love of self was the growth and work of years.

CHAPTER XXIX.

NEWS FROM THE SEAT OF WAR.

THE domestic changes and misfortunes by which the Hazel Combe family had of late been agitated had prevented, or rather suspended, the interest which all—in a greater or less degree—had previously taken in the events of the Indian war.

In the quiet and seclusion of the Rectory, however, Rosamond had at last ample time to dwell, both upon the sufferings endured, and the laurels nobly won, upon those distant battle-fields.

She was gratified also to find that Mr. Santland, relieved from the pressure of his disgraceful debt, and soothed and enlivened by her constant presence, began once more to take an interest in passing events. He would now watch anxiously for the arrival of the post, and during his daily walks with Rosamond he would discuss with her the intelligence which on the

evening before she had read out to him from the pages of the newspaper.

Poor Rosamond ! How anxiously and fearfully did she run her eye over the columns in search of the one name which she half hoped, half feared, might appear among the wounded ! Often did she marvel, and many were her conjectures regarding the man whom, disgraced as he had admitted himself to be, she had never been able to banish from her memory ; and when week succeeded week, and skirmish after skirmish was fought, and still the name of Percy Elliot, dead or living, found no place amongst the records of British heroism, then she began to fear that all hopes of his rehabilitation were at an end, and that she would see her lover's face no more.

Almost immediately after the final settlement of the Hazel Combe succession, Miss Fendall and her brother had absented themselves for the space of nearly two months from their home. It had seemed only natural that they should require a change of place and objects, and the sole marvel was that in the month of December, they should have chosen the English lakes as the scene in which to obtain it.

They had not mentioned Rydal as theirulti-

mate destination ; but the village postmistress, to say nothing of the steward and upper servants, knew to what town or post-office the Colonel's letters were to be re-directed, so it was no matter for surprise that all Hillingstone soon became cognisant of the whereabouts to which Miss Fendall and her brother had betaken themselves.

Their absence was a great relief and comfort to Rosamond. It was such a pleasure—a sad one, it is true, but still a pleasure—to roam over the old house, and to seek in the pretty flower-garden (now, alas ! no longer her own) for the first fresh bursting green of the snow-drop leaves, and for the late autumn violets which, in that unusually mild season, were still hiding in their bed of leaves.

She could also, in Frederica's absence, visit amongst her poor (for *hers* they still persisted in considering themselves) without fear of being considered an intruder on her cousin's rights—that cousin whose ideas of charity differed so widely from her own.

On the day when the return of the master and mistress of Hazel Combe was expected, Hortense de Berny, who had grown to be a great favourite with Mr. Santland, had, in

company with the now pensive Laura, spent a pleasant hour in the Rector's drawing-room.

"Have you heard the news?" Hortense had exclaimed on her entrance. "Such news! *La Cousine* Crutchley is full of it. Some one is coming to live with Rica at Hazel Combe; and who do you think it is?"

Rosamond professed her utter inability to form even a conjecture as to the name of the fortunate individual destined by Frederica to share her grandeur, while the Rector, in his cynical way, suggested that possibly Aunt Mary, of Broadlands Farm, might be expected on a visit to her *nevy*.

"*Du tout*," said Hortense; "and as you have now evidently exhausted your list of possibilities, I will inform you that the expected guest is no other than our cousin Barbara."

"Barbara Westerham?" exclaimed Rosamond in amazement.

"Yes, Cousin Barbara, in the bones, for of the covering of the same she had none, poor thing, when last I had the honour of seeing her. And let me tell you, that *la vieille* Barbara, at fifty-five, *decolletée à l'outrance*, is an

awful sight. Well, she is to be removed from the decent misery of a lodging in Wilton Place, and promoted to fill the place of *chaperone* to the Hazel Combe heiress!"

"How wonderful!" exclaimed Rosamond; "but Barbara Westerham and Rica will never agree. I can hardly imagine two people less suited to each other."

"Like two circumferences, however, which only touch at one point," said Hortense, "they will be in some sort united by their common affection and admiration for Myles. I have always thought *that* was Barbara's weak point, and now I am certain of it. Rosa, *ma chère*, secure as I at present feel myself from the temptations of my own heart, I tremble to think that, in the autumn of my days, I may be subject to the follies incidental to that susceptible period of life."

"Nonsense," said Rosamond, laughing.

"You may laugh, but it is as well to guard against contingencies; and if, at the dangerous age of forty I should find myself making *les doux yeux* to a *joli garçon*—don't laugh, Rosamond, I feel myself quite liable to human disorders—why, I trust to your friendship to recall me to my senses. And now, you most military

of women," she added, turning to her sister, "commence the reading of your Colonel's letter, and prove to *la chère Rosamond qu'il manie aussi bien la plume que l'épée.*"

The reading of Colonel Walker's letter (he had ascended another step on the military ladder) occupied a considerable period of time; for besides that the worthy officer's calligraphy was none of the plainest, there were little sentences to be missed, and affectionate appellations to be blushed over, as Laura, justly proud of her absent warrior, doled out such scraps of information as she judged would be interesting to her hearers.

The letter concluded thus—

"You remember what I wrote to you of Serjeant-Major Denham Heathcote? You must have seen his name often, too, in the papers as a soldier who has singularly distinguished himself. I am happy to say that he is now promoted to a second lieutenancy in his battalion, and well does he deserve the rank; for a more chivalrous and fine young fellow it has never been my lot to meet."

The mention of this brave soldier chanced to interest Rosamond far more than any other portion of the Colonel's letter. She could not

account for the fact, but so it was, and after her visitors had departed, she lost no time in searching amongst the various public journals which contained detailed accounts of the Indian war for the name of the private soldier whose deeds had been thought worthy of public mention.

More than once her eye, as it glanced over the columns, caught the words "Denham Heathcote;" and it appeared clear even to her unmilitary understanding, that from the time when he first joined the army his conduct had secured for him both the esteem and the goodwill of his officers; while in every encounter with the enemy he had displayed an amount of daring courage, which, together with his patient endurance of privation and fatigue, had caused his name, lowly as was his military rank, to stand high amongst the defenders of his country's rights.

"And still this dreadful war goes on! Lucknow is not relieved, and the terrible lists of killed and wounded fill up the columns of the papers! Alas, alas, for the wives and mothers! Alas, for all who may be sorrowing over their dear ones who are fighting in this deadly strife!"

So thought Rosamond Fendall, as, after replacing the filed newspapers in their accustomed place, she endeavoured to chase from her brow all outward semblance of anxiety and suspense.

CHAPTER XXX.

ROSAMOND'S DREAM.

"LUCKNOW is relieved! Rosamond, rejoice with me, and let us thank God together that Lucknow is relieved at last!"

The glad news was proclaimed by Hortense de Berny who one morning rushed tumultuously into the Rectory drawing-room, bearing in her hand a telegram, which Lady Westerham (whose brother, as it may be remembered, held high command in India) had just received from London.

"Glorious news, is it not? But Laura—poor child—is in a wretched state! How thankful I am not to be a hero's wife!"

"And," rejoined the greatly excited Rosamond, "it will be so long before we can expect any details. Telegrams are very doubtful blessings, dear Hortense!"

"And you, my Rosa, are as much agitated as though your husband were a fiery dragoon,

whose fourth charger had just been killed under him, whilst another was being led out to slaughter ! Now really——”

And she was proceeding in this bantering strain, when a closer examination of her friend's agitated countenance arrested her words. She had too much delicacy of feeling, however, to press for an explanation, and therefore poor Rosamond was speedily left by her considerate visitor to the indulgence of those vague hopes and fears which had of late begun to try her nerves and patience to the utmost.

Very soon (but only those who remember the anguish of that terrible suspense can tell how long it seemed) the detailed accounts arrived of that most gallant rescue ; then women's tears of bereavement, and of regrets only to end with life, mingled mournfully with the deep thanksgiving of the freed ; for many a noble heart had ceased to beat that day ; and gallant soldiers who had returned unscathed from desperate fights on European battle-fields, lay lifeless on the Indian soil—dying with sword in hand, and medals on their fearless breasts—departed heroes of a noble band of martyrs !

Amongst the list of those who were reported

as slightly wounded, was Laura's husband. Rosamond was glad to note his name, for his little wife—ay, and Hortense to boot, despite her boasted wise philosophy—would hail with joy this added evidence of their Colonel's prowess.

Individually Rosamond had few friends or relatives in that distant army. Not one name indeed struck her as familiar, till she came to that of Second-Lieutenant Denham Heathcote, "dangerously wounded."

Why did she keep her tearful eyes fixed upon those fearful words? Why did her heart sink within her as she pictured to herself that young soldier, lying bleeding on the battle-ground—dying—dead, perhaps, far from home and country—friends and kindred?

She could not tell what stirred within her breast this mighty pity for the wounded man. In vain she bid herself remember that he was nought to her—his image would return by night and day—in loneliness and silence it was near her, whispering a claim upon her heart for tenderest compassion. Nor did her pity and admiration grow less keen, when later accounts proclaimed that Lieutenant Heathcote had been shot through the arm in the fruitless endeavour to

save his Colonel's life, and that, wounded though he was, he had, with the arm which still remained to him, amply avenged the death of one over whose loss the British army mourned.

"A fine fellow that young Heathcote," Myles Fendall remarked, when, on the following evening, a little party of relations met at the Abbey to enliven the spirits of its hospitable owner; "and, by Jove, what a lucky fellow! Luck has a great deal to do with it. Every one can fight—I mean," he added pointedly, and glancing at Rosamond as he spoke, "I mean there are very few exceptions. Of course, you may, once in a hundred years, come upon a fellow who wants pluck—but, thank God, it's deuced rare."

"How about the Dook's agreeable suggestion regarding his young officers and the bow window in St. James's Street?" asked Lord Westerham.

"Oh! we all know that was only *chaff*," cried Dandy Dick, authoritatively; and the laugh was so general at the idea of the Iron Duke's condescending to joke, that the remarks of Myles regarding this recorded instance of a great man's ingratitude passed unheeded.

"Have you been told anything in *your* letters of this young man?" asked Lord Westerham of Myles.

"Only that he is a very gentlemanly fellow—must be a gentleman, they suppose—and that he is remarkably good-looking. Barbara, you will have to take care what you are about if you ever fall in with this hero," he continued, sauntering to the tea-table, where the angular Miss Westerham sat, doing her utmost to look youthful. "I shall watch you at the hours when lovers' vows sound sweet in every whispered word; and, as the dépôt of the Lieutenant's regiment is at C——, you will very likely have an opportunity of listening together to the nightingale's high notes in the lanes about Hazel Combe."

"Old Barbara," as Myles disrespectfully called her, was, strange to say, rather gratified by Colonel Fendall's impertinences. She was in the habit of paying that gentleman many *delicate* compliments and attentions, under which head may be classed (although the adjective is the reverse of appropriate) the very *décolletée* dress which so greatly shocked Hortense de Berny's Parisian ideas of decency and good taste.

There was but little time left for conversation amongst that company of cousins, for Rosamond was in haste to return to the Rectory, where she had left Mr. Santland alone. There was a little talk about Maud Crutchley, who, following in the steps of her plainer and unsuccessful sister, had also taken (in the hope of captivating harmless, Puseyish Mr. Harvey, junior) to church-decorating and spasmodic kneeling; and then the party prepared to separate.

Rosamond had given her opinion in favour of Maud's chances of success. She was rather partial to the Doctor's daughter, for in her present state of mind she felt a general and comprehensive sympathy with the love-pangs of her sex.

Eventually she retired to rest, and to dream that she saw Maud Crutchley decked with orange-flowers, and mounted on a gorgeously-accoutred elephant, while Lieutenant Denham Heathcote lay bleeding on the ground, crushed by the huge feet of the sagacious and useful animal.

CHAPTER XXXI.

'THE HERO'S RETURN.

"I THINK you might, at any rate, have couched your refusal in rather more civil terms."

"Perhaps I might, and I am sure I should have done so, had you not appeared to think that you were paying me so very great a compliment."

Rosamond spoke the words angrily enough. She was hurrying across the park to the Rectory, anxious only to be rid of a companion whose annoyance and agitation were apparently greater even than her own.

Colonel Fendall had just—not a little to his own surprise—made an offer of marriage to his cousin Rosamond. How it had come about at last he would have found it difficult to tell; and now that the momentary madness had passed away, the act appeared in the light of an imprudence, utterly unworthy, as indeed it was, of

Colonel Myles Fendall's far-seeing and worldly-wise character.

Rosamond's unqualified and even scornful rejection were doubtless instrumental in opening his eyes ; and now as, with hasty strides, he walked by the side of the impatient girl, he found himself half rejoicing over his escape, while his feelings of love and admiration were rapidly changing to sentiments far less flattering to his cousin.

To be refused by a penniless girl, and refused in such a fashion, was an affront not easily to be forgiven. "But," mused the self-consoling man, "if she had accepted me, I must have betrayed Rica—poor Rica, whose only object, as I firmly believe, was my aggrandisement. After all, she is worth a hundred of this cold, duty-loving girl. I don't believe her beauty is going to last, and then——"

He gave a furtive glance at Rosamond, but the glowing cheek and flashing eyes were ill calculated to confirm him in his disparaging opinion, so after heaving a sigh of mingled regret and anger, he walked on for several minutes in silence.

It was altogether a very disagreeable time—

a *mauvais quart d'heure à passer*—and only the strong inclination which he felt to make some such remark as that with which this chapter is commenced, deterred Myles from cutting short the annoyance at once by leaving Rosamond to pursue her way alone.

Her answer to his cavalierly-expressed reproach called for something like apology and explanation.

She had misunderstood him, he declared. Nothing could have been farther from his intentions than to imply——

He was beginning to feel the full difficulty of removing an impression which it was most natural that his auditress should have received, when, to his relief, they saw approaching them (for their path led them at this point across the avenue leading to the house) a carriage which both recognised as one belonging to the Hilling-stone Station.

They were approaching a slight rise in the ground, and the vehicle, which was an open one, and drawn by one exhausted-looking horse, toiled slowly up the ascent. No luggage, not even the smallest of carpet-bags was visible by the driver's side; but within the carriage, and with his eyes fixed on the pedestrians, was a

gentleman whose appearance at once attracted their attention.

He was evidently young—some four years under thirty, probably—and his originally fair complexion was bronzed by exposure to the air and sun. A long beard, thick and silky as a Turk's, floated over his broad chest. On his head was one of the least pretentious of “wide-awakes,” and (for it was a cold afternoon in March) a large military cloak was thrown over his shoulders.

Only one look did Rosamond turn upon the stranger, but that look was sufficient, for the eyes of love—of love which had never slumbered nor slept—could not be deceived, and Rosamond knew that Percy Elliot had returned to her.

She stood still, as if riveted to the spot, while Myles stared, first at her and then at the advancing vehicle, in amazement. At last the truth broke upon him; and, almost seizing her arm, he drew her forward, while still the carriage dragged its weary weight towards the summit of the ascent.

Not so, however, was the adventure to terminate, for, even before Rosamond had time to express her surprise at her cousin's interference,

a rapid step was heard approaching them from behind, and in another moment Percy Elliot stood before them.

He took off his hat, bowing low to Rosamond as though she were a queen, and then, with a distant and haughty salutation to her companion, he inquired when he could have the honour of an hour's private interview with Colonel Fendall.

CHAPTER XXXII.

PERCY ELLIOT'S REWARD.

"WHEN you please. In an hour's time I shall be at the Combe. If it suits you to wait there till my return, you are at liberty to do so."

He spoke with an air of careless insolence ; but a keen observer might have noticed that his lip quivered, and that it required a strong effort to enable him to retain his composure.

"So be it," returned Percy. "In an hour from this time you may expect me." And, after another respectful raising of his hat to Rosamond, he was turning to go, when she, moved by an undefined feeling of alarm, exclaimed hurriedly—

"Mr. Elliot—Percy—cannot you speak to Colonel Fendall here ? What are your secrets with him which I may not hear ? I am not curious ; I do not care to listen to a word ; but—but—I entreat you not to go to Hazel Combe ! Pray—pray remember——"

She could not finish her entreaty, for a burst of tears arrested the words upon her lips.

He took her hand in his. He could not help it, for the familiar sound of his own name spoken by that pleading voice removed the imaginary barrier which had been raised up between them; and then he bade her in a whisper not to fear, adding aloud—

“ Your cousin would not be well pleased, Miss Fendall, were I to make the high road the arena of our confidence. It will not, I imagine, be a long one; and if you will allow me, I shall lose no time in coming in person to make you acquainted with its results.”

He was gone before Rosamond could reply, and she, with a sinking heart, walked onwards.

“ You love this man, then, Rosamond?” said Myles, passionately. “ You are mean enough to show this coward that he still has power over you. By heavens, I had thought you had more spirit. I could not have believed that the woman existed who could——”

But Rosamond stopped him with a calm dignity of resentment for which he was ill prepared.

“ Colonel Fendall,” she said, “ there is one species of cowardice—and, in my opinion, it is

of all others the most degrading—and of that, at least, you should be the last to accuse the gentleman whom you have dared to slander. I speak of the cowardice which leads to calumny of the absent."

They had reached the Rectory gate when Rosamond ceased speaking, and, without a parting salutation, she passed by her angry cousin, and, entering the house, closed the door upon him.

During the ensuing hour of waiting, not one of the three so deeply interested in the result of the interview was so much to be pitied as Colonel Fendall. He retraced his steps across the park in exceeding heaviness of heart, and with a mind filled with portents of coming evil.

Many were his conjectures as to the cause of Percy Elliot's visit, and from not one of them could he gather a single ray of consolation.

His first inquiry on his return to the house was for Miss Fendall, and he was not sorry to hear that she and Barbara had gone out driving, and were not expected to return for several hours.

"I expect a gentleman on business; let him be shown into the library," were his injunctions.

to the butler ; and then, with what patience he could assume, he sat down to wait the coming of his visitor.

And who is there amongst us, my readers, whose life has been so entirely uneventful that he cannot look back to some such trying moments as those which Myles Fendall was just then passing ? Who is there that cannot remember the weary, painful watching—the alternations of hope and fear—the longing for, and yet dreading, the arrival of him by whom the misery of doubt would be converted into the still more unendurable suffering of conviction ? All this had Myles to bear till the instant when, punctual to his appointment, Percy Elliot was ushered into the room where, planted on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire, the master of the house stood ready to receive him.

He did not advance a step to meet his visitor, but, pointing to a chair, requested him to be seated. This civility Percy declined, and remained standing, the fingers of his left hand slightly resting on the table which was between himself and Myles. Then, for the first time, the latter noticed that Elliot's right-arm sleeve was empty.

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to the butler ; and then, with what patience he could assume, he sat down to wait the coming of his visitor.

And who is there amongst us, my readers, whose life has been so entirely uneventful that he cannot look back to some such trying moments as those which Myles Fendall was just then passing ? Who is there that cannot remember the weary, painful watching—the alternations of hope and fear—the longing for, and yet dreading, the arrival of him by whom the misery of doubt would be converted into the still more unendurable suffering of conviction ? All this had Myles to bear till the instant when, punctual to his appointment, Percy Elliot was ushered into the room where, planted on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire, the master of the house stood ready to receive him.

He did not advance a step to meet his visitor, but, pointing to a chair, requested him to be seated. This civility Percy declined, and remained standing, the fingers of his left hand slightly resting on the table which was between himself and Myles. Then, for the first time, the latter noticed that Elliot's right-arm sleeve was empty.

"I have come on disagreeable and painful business," began Elliot.

"I suppose so," rejoined his host, coarsely interrupting him; "therefore, I suggest that the sooner it is over the better."

Percy, who did not appear to notice the rudeness of Colonel Fendall's tone, said, after a moment's pause—

"Perhaps you are not aware that I have lately returned from India."

His host bowed stiffly.

"I have not the honour," he said, with a sneer, "to be *au fait* of Mr. Percy Elliot's movements."

Percy was roused.

"My movements," he rejoined, "may chance to interest you a little more when you hear that in the hospital at C—— I fell in with a certain woman of colour, a pensioner on Colonel Fendall's bounty. Her name is Elizabeth Collins. Does that refresh your memory, or must I enter into particulars, and explain——"

A feeling of generous pity arrested his words, and he looked at Myles as though in the hope that he would say something to make his painful task more easy.

"You may explain anything you like," said

Myles, "so long as I am not supposed accountable for the eccentricities of any surmises it may suit your book to form."

The flow of compassion was checked, and Percy continued—remorselessly this time—the explanation which he had begun.

"Colonel Fendall," he said, "it may suit you to feign ignorance; but the time has come when the evil deed done years ago must be brought to light; for your accomplice has confessed all, and the fraud which has deprived Miss Rosamond Fendall of her birthright will be punished as it deserved."

"Oh, that is it, is it?" sneered Fendall, whose pale, agitated face gave the lie to his light words. "It is the Hazel Combe heiress whose cause you are espousing. A goodly specimen of knight-errantry, truly; and Miss Fendall has reason to be proud of her champion."

"Good God!" exclaimed Percy, advancing nearer—so near that his sudden approach startled Myles—"can it be possible that a man whose conscience must reproach him with a deed so dark can treat discovery with levity, and mock when the punishment is near at hand?"

"When it will have pleased you to become a little more explicit, I may, perhaps, under-

stand—though it will be difficult to pardon—the tirade to which you have compelled me to listen.”

The manner was still sarcastic, although a slight tremor in his voice betrayed his rising emotion. Percy replied immediately, and the tones of his rich low voice, speaking with quiet dignity, contrasted strongly with his adversary’s agitated petulance.

“ It was a terrible moment,” he said, “ when first I learnt that my mother, the mother whose sorrow I had so long respected, had sold her child; but far more crushing was the blow when I suspected—perhaps, however, I may have wrongfully accused her—that my sister, taking advantage of the shameful fraud, had appropriated to herself the inheritance of another. Colonel Fendall,” he continued, with rapidly-increasing agitation, “ if you can certify to me that this is not the case, if you will pledge to me your honour as a gentleman that Sybil Elliot—that my sister still believes that you are her brother, I will do my utmost to screen this guilty transaction from the world, and will endeavour, as much as in me lies, to save both you and her from the consequences of your error.”

Myles was silent, and Percy Elliot's brow grew dark as midnight. He commanded his passion, however, and said, still calmly and solemnly—

“The woman, Elizabeth Collins, informed me (and I have her deposition in writing), that she was engaged after Mrs. Matthew Fendall's death as nurse to her little girl. She was entrusted with the care of the child on its way to England. You being also a passenger in the ship, as well as my poor mother, then a widow, and returning with her baby to her native country. Need I go on? and must I ask what tempted you and one whose name it is agony to me to mention, to conceal the death, on the passage, of Colonel Fendall's child, and to substitute in its place my sister—the girl who is now living—God! in what a strange position—the reputed sister of a man who has shared her crime, and the reveller in riches which he has wrested from another!”

He stopped, overpowered by the violence of his emotion, and was only roused by Colonel Fendall saying, still in the same bitter and sneering tone—

“Have you any proofs here with you that

the assertions you have made are not the mere coinage of your brain?"

"I have the nurse's deposition, and many letters, both from you and—and from my mother."

Fendall's countenance visibly brightened.

"I mean," added Percy, "that I have *copies* of those documents, the originals being in my lawyer's hands. But in order that nothing might be wanting to prove the substitution, I have brought the woman Collins to England, and she will, as she affirms, be able to identify my sister as the daughter of Major Elliot. And now, is it not better that instead of acting in this matter as enemies, we should consult together as to the best means to be adopted in order to prevent this shameful business from becoming a public scandal. Restitution must of necessity at once be made, and——"

"The reward expected for his exertions by Mr. Percy Elliot is, I conclude, the hand of the heiress; but mark me, sir, sooner than see my cousin Rosamond the wife of a man who has disgraced himself, I would——"

But what Colonel Myles was prepared to do, was fated to remain a secret to the world, for at that moment the door opened noiselessly,

and Rosamond Fendall came towards the speakers.

They were both standing close together before the fire, and judging from the excited expression of their countenances, a braver spirit than that possessed by that young girl might have taken alarm at their lengthened interview.

On seeing her, Percy Elliot smiled—a fond, encouraging smile.

"So you would not trust me," he said reproachfully.

But Colonel Fendall's rage burst out without disguise.

"Rosamond," he cried, "you ought to take shame to yourself for coming amongst men, and listening to their conversation. But since you have come, you had better hear the whole. Know, then, that this gentleman—this renowned Mr. Percy Elliot—has discovered a strange fact, namely, that Frederica is not my father's daughter, and that you are therefore the heiress of Hazel Combe. And what do you suppose he will expect as a reward for thus raking into the dirty ashes of the past? What, but the hand of Miss Rosamond Fendall? What, but the possession of a property which

for centuries has been in the hands of brave and honourable men ; what, but——”

But ere he could more fully give vent to the fury into which he had lashed himself, Percy stopped him in his turn.

“ Hush ! ” he said, “ and abstain from invectives which afterwards you may see reason to regret. Miss Fendall,” he continued, turning to Rosamond, and addressing her with a kind of solemn tenderness, “ once—in the few precious lines which ever since have rested on my heart—you gave me leave to *hope*. The prize to be attained was high, the cost but little—for without love and honour what was life to me ? Many months have passed away since then and now I have returned, at least so much a there is left of me,” he added with a smile and glancing at his empty sleeve. “ I have returned to tell you that—Pshaw—what a stage trick it seems ! —A most stupid *coup d'théâtre* ! But Rosamond, you will not despise me when you learn that I have been a private soldier during the war. I happened to be rich in Christian names, and as Denham Heathcote, I have redeemed from obloquy the name which, as Percy Elliot, the world said I had tarnished and disgraced.”

As he spoke, he offered his left hand to the true-hearted girl, whose love had stood, not only the test of absence, but of the shame and ridicule which had been heaped upon him, and Rosamond, nothing heeding the presence of their heartless enemy, and remembering only how proudly she could share the name of him who had returned to her thus maimed and mutilated, seized the hand which he had half-tremblingly extended, and covered it with tears and kisses.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RICA GROWS REFRactory.

MYLES FENDALL—guilty, selfish, and scheming though he was—had, nevertheless, claims upon human pity, when, after leaving his cousin Rosamond and her lover to their blissful *tête-à-tête*, he sought an interview with her whom the world had so long looked upon as his sister.

Rica was greatly changed in many respects since the day when her blind devotion to *him* had led her treacherously to betray the trust reposed in her by Sir Matthew. The reproaches of her conscience, joined to the strangely complicated feelings growing out of her changed relations with Colonel Fendall, had deprived her of rest and sleep, and begun seriously to injure her health.

Myles, too, was altered—altered especially—but that could scarcely be wondered at—in his demeanour towards herself. He had grown

reserved and cold, whilst Rica—Sybil Elliot, as we should rightly call her—had ceased from the moment when Colonel Fendall had whispered his fatal secret in her ear, to lavish on him those fond, sisterly caresses which he had once so dearly valued, and her manner had speedily out-done his own in its distant and heart-chilling *reteneue*.

She received the intelligence conveyed to her by Myles with an amount of composure which, to him, was totally incomprehensible. She did not appear to feel the slightest regret when thinking of her own changed fortunes; on the contrary, she not only seemed, but expressed herself relieved by the now necessary restitution of Rosamond's inheritance. But what *did* pain her, and that with an agony of remorse which she did not attempt to conceal, was the reflection, that but for her unfortunate intervention—the term was certainly a mild one—Colonel Fendall would now be in possession of a sum of money which would place him in a position of independence.

“Yes, you certainly did a bad stroke of business there,” said Myles, in answer to her passionate self-reproaches. “But unless Rosamond allows herself to be influenced by that fellow

down below, she may be trusted to do the right thing. She was well aware of Sir Matthew's intentions, and that ten thousand pounds is safe, at all events."

For the first time in her life, Rica, for so we will still call her, looked at the selfish speaker with something very like contempt. She had no innate love for money herself, and she could not understand the force of that degrading passion in another. Besides, there were other feelings which she had hoped would at that moment have usurped the place of love for that all-conquering metal—one more attractive, she had fancied, might have roused him to a sense of all he owed her, and the reward of Colonel Fendall's love was, she thought, due to her for all that she had done and suffered.

With this conviction on her mind, it may be imagined with what mingled emotions of anger and mortification she heard him descant on his conviction that the "fellow Elliot, or whatever else his *alias* might be," would hardly, for his mother's and his sister's sake, be willing to make this disagreeable affair public.

"You will remain Miss Fendall to the world," he said, "and no unpleasant consequences will ensue beyond the giving up of Hazel Combe,

which is a bore, of course, but we can't have everything our own way in this accursed world."

"And pray," asked Rica, endeavouring to conceal the effects of the blow which had been by this suggestion struck both upon her affection and her pride—"pray what is the world to think of this sudden making-over of the property to another? It will not be easy to account for Rosamond's sudden promotion, and——"

"Don't anticipate difficulties," interrupted Myles, crossly, "when you should be only too thankful for the prospect of escape which is held out to you."

But Rica was not the least thankful, on the contrary, she vowed, with a burst of passionate tears, that nothing should induce her to retain the name of Fendall. She would proclaim the truth to the world. She would not be indebted to Rosamond Fendall for a home. She would confess everything to the courageous brother who would not reject her love, and with him to support and protect her, she would defy the scorn of the world and the ridicule of her enemies.

For an hour at least Colonel Fendall reasoned in vain with the impetuous and indignant crea-

ture, whose habits of self-indulgence he had fostered, and who had never till of late experienced either contradiction or disappointment.

Myles was astonished to find how rapidly his power over her had evaporated. He could not imagine that he Myles Fendall had become through his meanness, his detection, and his degradation, an object of contempt—a contempt, too, which was the first step towards dislike. So he pursued the line of argument which would at one time have been all-powerful, and only changed it when he found that neither his own claims nor those of self-interest had any weight with the refractory one.

But weariness of his presence obtained at last the concession which Colonel Fendall's reasoning and entreaties had failed to extract; and Rica, heart-sick and humbled, pledged her word that by her at least the secret of her birth should never be made public to the world.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

VIVE LA REINE !

"I CANNOT bring myself to believe it, Percy ! It is impossible that Frederica should have known for years that she was not our relation, and——"

Elliot was terribly distressed.

"Rosamond," he said, hastily interrupting her, "I seem doomed to approach you with disgrace of some kind hovering about me or mine. I know not for how long a time my sister has connived at this deception, but the fact is, I fear, only too certain that she *has* connived at it, while my mother——But, Rosamond, it is not yet too late"—and his cheek grew a shade paler, though his voice did not falter as he said the words—"it is not yet too late to take back the precious promise you have made me. It is not too late to say that you will not link your name with dishonour. And if your reason and your pride speak louder than

the heart which you have given me, then let nothing stay the words upon your lips, and I will say farewell with grief unutterable, but with no lingering spark of anger in my breast."

It is probable that Percy had little fear of an abandonment on the part of his betrothed, but nevertheless he received with fervent gratitude her assurances that no derelictions from the path of honour and of duty on the part of his near kindred could affect her love for and her trust in him. She was his only—his whilst life should last—his friend, his companion, and the wife who would share alike his sorrows and his joys.

After the first rapturous moments which had followed on the departure from the room of Colonel Fendall, Rosamond, remembering her cousin's mysterious words, asked her lover for an explanation. It was a terrible task which she had imposed upon him, but Percy, knowing well that it could not be delegated to another, proceeded to repeat to her in greater detail the intelligence which he had already imparted to a far less sympathising auditor.

He, in as few words as possible, recapitulated the events which had followed on his departure from England. He spoke of the voyage out,

when he, an humble private soldier, attracted the notice of the gallant, kindly-natured colonel who now lay buried in a distant grave. He told of his commanding officer's recognition of himself, of the generous silence which he preserved concerning the past, and of the encouragement, friendly and most judicious, which marked his conduct towards the recruit. All this was described shortly and succinctly, but when he came to his last engagement with the rebels, and to the description of his noble-hearted colonel's death, tears filled his eyes, and it was with difficulty that he could continue his narrative.

His own share in that disastrous battle was little dwelt upon, for he simply stated that he was conveyed with many others to the hospital and there underwent the operation of amputation of the right arm.

"And as I lay in my bed, Rosamond, recovering slowly yet surely from my wound, what joyful visions thronged through my brain, and proved my most healing medicine! Nature has, I believe, blessed me with a sanguine temperament, and I trust that some gratitude to the mighty Power which had preserved me in the heat and fury of the battle, raised my

aspirations heaven-ward ; but ever, love, your image mingled with my dreams of future happiness ; and Hope, that blessed angel which leads on with smiles during our walk through life, and spreads at last before us the buoyant wings on which our souls will be borne upwards to a better country, bade me remember that perhaps for me my Rosamond's heart still throbbed with lingering love, and that——”

But his further words were checked by a glance at the deep, tender eyes, which seemed to look into his soul ; and clasping her closely to his breast, he listened for a few moments to the beatings of that faithful heart, drawing courage from its inexhaustible well of love for the painful story which he had yet to tell.

In the hospital—so ran his tale—there was a coloured woman in attendance on a soldier whose relationship to her own English father she had ascertained, and the duties of that woman called her on several occasions into the ward in which he, Percy Elliot, was lying ; how it happened, is a matter of little moment, but she chanced to discover the name of the wounded officer, and from that time she contrived to be constantly near him, waiting on him, nursing him with faithful care, and thus

contributing not a little to his eventual recovery.

From this woman he learned the secret which had made so signal a change in Rosamond's fortunes. It was one, as his attendant often assured him, which had long lain heavily on her conscience, and of late (probably since some delay had occurred in the payment of the pension settled on her by Colonel Fendall) she had, according to her account, become very desirous of revealing the truth to those who might be interested in becoming acquainted with it.

"The deposition of Elizabeth Collins, for that is her name, was taken before me, and in the presence of our chaplain, who has promised to be silent on the subject till such time as I shall see fit to release him from his engagement. Your poor little cousin's nurse is now in England, Rosamond, and there does not, as I firmly believe, exist a single hindrance to the restitution of your rights."

"But at what a cost!" sighed Rosamond; "and what an exposure of others must that restitution entail! Your mother, Percy! Ah, how could she sell her child? How part through life from one who should have been so dear to her?"

"My mother," rejoined Percy, in a tone of deep sadness, "was sorely tempted by her own exceeding poverty, and by the hope of saving one child at least from the danger and the misery of want. I have seen her since my return; and oh, Rosamond! could you visit her in her lowly cottage, and judge for yourself how poor, and humbled, and how sorely conscience-stricken is that unhappy woman, you too would pity and forgive her."

"I have nothing to forgive," said Rosamond, softly, as she stole her little hand into his; "your mother shall be my mother, Percy, and her days of sorrow and distress will, I trust, be remembered by her no longer."

"*I* did not remember them, I fear," said Percy, "when I lay in the hospital listening to the cries of the *chockodaurs*, and the howls of the jackals as they roamed near the walls of the dismal building. I only thought *then* of my Rosamond, and even later, when, in my state of convalescence, I was allowed to wander out under the shady trees, listening to the nightingales, and inhaling the fragrance of the jessamines and roses, even then I fear that compassion for my poor lonely parent found no place within my breast, for Rosamond's image

was enshrined there, to the exclusion of aught else besides."

The hours which slipped by during this lengthened interview, were not exclusively devoted either to reminiscences of the past, or blissful enjoyment of the present, for both Rosamond and Percy understood the necessity for the immediate adoption of some plan by which publicity might be avoided, and the honour of those implicated in the degrading transaction preserved in the eyes of a censorious world.

They soon convinced themselves of the expediency of Frederica's still continuing to bear the name of Fendall; and (for a suspicion of Rica's share in the suppression of Sir Matthew's Will had never suggested itself to those too generous hearts) it did not appear a matter of difficulty to either, that the said Will should be supposed by an enquiring public to have "turned up" somewhere, no one need question how or *where*, and thus Rosamond would be enabled to recover without annoyance or mortification to others, the possession of her ancestors.

I will not attempt to describe the joy of Mr. Santland when he also was initiated into the

mysteries of the past, and learned with surprise unspeakable that the future of his beloved Bessie's daughter was so fraught with happiness and prosperity. Then, as was so frequently the case with the man who fancied himself an unbeliever, the eloquent words of Holy Writ poured spontaneously from his lips, and laying his hand on Rosamond's meek head, he said, with a reverence befitting the solemn thanksgiving—

“The wickedness of the father has not been held in remembrance, and the sin of the mother is done away.’ Let your soul be joyful, little one, this day; for the posterity of the righteous who sprung from the sinner’s loins will not be for ever doomed to beg her bread.”

Sadly confused were often now the remarks of one whose genius had been so misdirected, and whose later years had been spent beneath a darkening cloud. Rosamond watched his aberrations anxiously — feeling alarmed, too, by the extravagance of his joy, which she considered, and with reason, as a proof that his mind was losing its balance, and his brain its power.

Still, rejoiced though he was that “the wicked had ceased to prosper,” Rosamond

found no difficulty in persuading Mr. Santland that the preservation of the momentous secret was greatly to be desired. The idea that the name of Fendall would be borne by one he considered as in the last degree unworthy, was certainly far from agreeable to him; but for his favourite Percy's sake he yielded to Rosamond's wishes, only stipulating that there should be as little delay as possible in the return of Bessie's daughter to Hazel Combe.

That once well-filled and quietly-cheerful house was empty and desolate enough now, for only Rica and the ancient Barbara remained to be the guests of her who was about to be re-installed in the home of her forefathers.

Frederica had pertinaciously refused to meet the brother, whose discovery of her evil deeds she found it difficult to forgive; and Percy, whose marriage with Rosamond was appointed to take place in June, had regretfully betaken himself to London, in the hope of accelerating by his presence the legal arrangements necessary to that auspicious event.

Myles, too, had decided that, for the present at least, Hazel Combe was no home for him, and he had therefore exchanged the sight of its

still leafless woods for the budding beauties of the London squares ; and his two cousins' uncongenial society for the good fellowship of "Prince's," and the rattle of the racket court.

Rosamond had promised her lover, previous to his departure, that she would not long remain in the cheerless solitude of Hazel Combe ; and had arranged that, before the expiration of a week, she would accept the often-repeated invitation of Lord and Lady Westerham to spend the ensuing two months in Grosvenor Street. It would be advisable, as all who loved her felt, that Rosamond should escape as much as possible from the observation and the comments of those who would gossip over the nine days' wonder of her accession to wealth and power. Happily, and even as they had anticipated, no difficulties arose in the making over of the property to its rightful owner. She was the last of her name and race ; and when it was publicly announced that at last the will of the lamented Sir Matthew had been discovered, though some shook their wise heads with an air of portentous meaning, and some few pointed the finger of scorn at the deposed Frederica, the majority accepted the fact as it was, and

hastened, without comment or question, to offer their congratulations to the fortunately reinstated Miss Fendall of Hazel Combe.

La Reine est déchue—Vive la Reine!

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE RECTOR'S ADVICE.

ROSAMOND's return to Hazel Combe was effected with the same absence of sentimentalism which had marked her departure but a few months before from the beautiful home which she had so long looked upon as her own. No carriage bore her triumphantly to the lofty portico of the old hall, and no array of waiting servants, or crowd of rejoicing tenantry were in waiting to bid her welcome. But early in the day, a tall, slight figure, still clad in the deepest mourning, and accompanied by the small faithful terrier which the Rector tolerated as *her* friend, was seen passing slowly along the park, and through the still brown and almost leafless trees to Hazel Combe.

Bare and weather-beaten had been those fine old forest monarchs, when Rosamond had, in heaviness of spirit, bidden them a sad farewell; and then, even as now, the cold air pierced

through the denuded branches, and chilled her as she passed them by. But, high and piercing as was the wild March wind, and silent as were the barren woods, Rosamond's heart danced with joy within her breast ; for to her—

“The forest glades were teeming with bright forms,
And no dark many-folded clouds foretold
The coming-on of storms.”

The only gloomy spot on the horizon of her happiness, was the reflection that Frederica had shown herself so unwilling to be her friend, and had hitherto kept aloof from every offer which kindness and sympathy had suggested for her consolation.

“And she must be so very unhappy,” thought the affectionate girl. “Myles has ever been to her so dear a brother—and, supposing even that she has long known this secret, why, he was still her brother—her friend from infancy, and the being in whom her every thought was centered.”

Many and deep, as Rosamond truly felt, had been the wounds inflicted both upon Rica's pride and her affections, and not the least among them was the desertion of the man for whom she had sacrificed so much, and whose absence, notwithstanding her changed feelings

towards him, greatly increased the sum of her mortification and regret.

It was the day previous to that which had been fixed upon by Rosamond for her removal to London, and Mr. Santland, who had dined at the Combe, was spending a last hour with its lonely mistress.

The Rector was speaking, and—what was an unusual occurrence with him—in terms of compassion of Frederica.

“She is a sad instance,” he remarked, “of the dangers we incur, when we give ourselves up to one prevailing and all-engrossing passion. Perilous to a man, but how infinitely more fatal to a woman, is the concentration of mind and heart on one sole, idolised object. *We* (and God knows that I speak from bitter experience) often possess an ‘idea’ which perverts our intellect, and imperils our happiness and reputation. But—and in this lies all the difference—where men possess the idea, women are possessed by it—possessed as though by a dangerous demon, which, having entered into the sanctuary of the heart, rules it with a rod of iron, and will not, save by a miracle, be cast out.”

“Poor Rica!” exclaimed Rosamond. “How she doated upon Myles, and how miserable

must his loss make her! If she would only consent to see me, I am sure she would be happier; but instead, she shuts herself up with that cross, gloomy Barbara, who, I am convinced, fans the flame of evil feelings with one hand, whilst with the other she throws cold water on the good. I cannot wonder that her parents (poor old people) should have made a pecuniary sacrifice to pension her off, for really ‘old Bab’—as Myles disrespectfully calls her—is very much to be objected to.”

“She is but one,” said the Rector, “of the countless warnings—useless beacons for the most part—which are set up before us to mark the rocks and shoals which everywhere beset our voyage through life. Think of those two useless women in the room upstairs, my dear, and let the examples, both of crime and folly, not be thrown away upon you. If you have children, Rosamond, teach them to follow in the footsteps of your blessed mother—now, I trust, a saint in heaven—and endeavour to shield them from the strokes of earthly misfortune, by enlarging the sphere of their affections, and by prompting them to active exertions for the good of those around them. Busy occupation preserves the mind from rust,

and the body from disease ; and experience has taught me that there are few sorrows which cannot be lessened by employment. Above all, my child, beware of that most relentless of human foes—*Remorse*. Once a prey to that fell enemy, Peace is over, and Hope cries out her last farewell. For the domestic demon (I have lived with him, Rosamond, and know how constant and how true he is) will follow his victim through the night and day—his only sure and trustworthy companion. In suffering he will be present to add venom to the sting, and in the cup of happiness he will not fail to mix the poisoned drop, which will embitter all.”

Santland rose as he spoke, and touching her forehead with his lips, turned to leave the room.

Rosamond thought him looking changed and ill, and entreated him to remain at Hazel Combe that night.

“ No, my dear,” he answered ; “ neither to-night nor any night, Rosamond. I shall never see you at Hazel Combe again. You have set your love upon a rose-leaf, child,” he added, in a voice which had grown suddenly indistinct,—“ you have set your love upon a rose-leaf; take

care that it be not crumpled, and ever remember the 'Golden Rule'—live for others rather than for yourself, and do good to them that despitefully use you. As for me—I shall go hence and be no more seen ; for," he muttered, "my heart is heavy within me, and the fear of death is fallen upon me."

He was gone before Rosamond could make any comment on his words ; but so alarmed was she by their incoherency, and by the evident depression under which he laboured, that she directed a trustworthy servant to follow him to the Rectory ; nor did she retire to rest till she had heard that her mother's once dearly-loved guardian was in safety within its walls.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RICA'S CONFESSION.

THAT night Rosamond lay upon her bed in a mood unusually restless and troubled. Sleep refused to come at her bidding ; nor could the thoughts of her great and unexpected happiness prevent her from dwelling upon sadder and more anxious memories.

Very uneasy was she regarding the Rector, who (now that she had, by her return to the possession of Hazel Combe, obtained what he had so long eagerly desired) appeared to have suddenly lost the power of appreciating the wished-for blessing, and to have sunk once more into his former state of mental despondency.

But what most sorely distressed her was the obstinate refusal of Frederica to respond, either by words or in writing, to any of her frequent notes and messages of kindness. That the unhappy girl was suffering terribly she doubted not ; and Rosamond yearned to assure the

humbled one of her affection, only asking to be allowed the privilege of comforting Percy's sister in any and every way which could be pointed out to her.

The light from the brightly burning fire shed a faint glow on the features of the young heiress, as, with her head resting on her sleepless pillow, her heart pined to bestow upon the desolate Frederica some of the happiness which had fallen to her own especial share.

How long she had remained thus communing with herself she knew not, when, infinitely to her amazement (for no sound of an opening door heralded its approach) a small, slight figure, robed in a white dressing-gown, slowly entered, and Frederica—for the intruder was no other than Rosamond's guilty guest—threw herself on her knees beside the bed.

Startled and bewildered, but, at the same time deeply touched by this unlooked-for act of humility, Rosamond would have thrown her arms round her weeping visitor, but Rica pushed her almost rudely away, saying, or rather screaming, as she did so—

“ You will not touch me when you know all
—you will hate me as I hate myself, and——”

“ Then tell me nothing, my poor love,” said

Rosamond, soothingly. " You have suffered enough for the faults of others, and any fanned errors which may weigh upon your conscience shall be buried for ever in oblivion."

Rica motioned her impatiently to silence.

" You know nothing—you can guess nothing of what I have to reveal to you," she sobbed out. " How should you? *You* have not been tempted! *You* have not had to play the game of life behind the scenes! You were not brought up by one who taught you how to lie—nor have you from your infancy been doomed, like me, to witness the mean and dirty shifts of pride to hide the outward signs of poverty. Rosamond! to you I may have seemed both careless and light-hearted, but young as I am I have borne the burthen and heat of the day, and the life before me seems but as a weary pilgrimage."

" Poor Rica!" said Rosamond, in her soft, tender voice, " we must teach you to forget your sufferings, and you shall not be allowed to fasten the past as a weight upon your wings."

" You will not talk of forgetfulness when you know the truth; and, Rosamond, I *must* speak it that justice may be done to others. My love for my—for Colonel Fendall, and his unceasing

tenderness, formed, as you well know, for years, my only happiness. Till a few days before Sir Matthew's death, I never, as God shall judge me, suspected that between us there was no tie of kindred ; and yet I often thought his conduct strange. There is no mystery now, however, for he loves *you*, Rosamond ; and from the moment when his passionate admiration for the rightful heiress of Hazel Combe effaced my weaker powers of pleasing, then his plans were changed, and—but why dwell upon the past? In an evil moment I—moved always by my love for Myles—became his bitterest enemy, and—oh, Rosamond, do not be too hard upon me—in a moment of madness and of sore temptation, I destroyed the Will by which an independence was secured to Colonel Fendall, and drew down shame on my own head for ever."

She stopped, and burying her face in her hands, gasped hysterically.

It was a trying moment for Rosamond, albeit she could not—or rather I should say she *would* not—understand the nature of the crime of which Rica had accused herself.

"Not another word," she cried, laying her finger on Rica's lips, for it was terrible to listen while Percy's sister called herself a felon!

"Not another word—oh ! please not—you do not know how much you grieve me. My dear grandfather had no secrets from me, and I was well aware of all his plans and intentions ; and, dearest Rica, they shall be fulfilled to the letter. In the eyes of the world you are still my cousin, and as Sir Matthew's other grand-daughter you must in every way be treated and regarded."

Rica was glad at last to be comforted, and after awhile, grateful for Rosamond's soothing tenderness, she grew more communicative, dwelling especially on the particulars as afforded to her by Myles of the guilty substitution of herself for Mrs. Matthew Fendall's buried infant.

"It was my mother's doing, far more than Colonel Fendall's," she said. "My mother was so very poor; and then—then I suppose that she loved Myles, and was happy to think that her poor child would be for ever under his care ; and oh, Rosamond ! for years it was such loving care ; and I was very happy."

"And you will be so again," said Rosamond. "If you have lost one brother, you have gained another ; and when once you become acquainted with dear Percy, you will not deem yourself a loser by the exchange."

Rica sighed wearily ; but she did not dare to confide to her gentle comforter the truth (knowing that to Rosamond's pure ear it would have a guilty sound). For from the hour when first she had learnt that no near ties of blood bound her to her much-loved Myles, a wilder, warmer passion had possessed her, and since,—struggling through her error with vain strife, and stumbling in her weakness and her haste, she had been a prey to those terrible conflicts of love and hate, which had left her now a shattered wreck in nerves and health ; and, as the Rector had truly said, a melancholy example of a selfish and therefore ill-requited affection.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE END OF A WASTED LIFE.

VERILY for Rosamond, during those two blissful months of courtship, the world seemed newly crowned with flowers—flowers on which the dew of tears could never rest, nor hidden poisonous stings linger amidst the blossoms.

Her only sorrowful moments were when letters from Combe Hatton reminded her of the declining powers of her earliest friend—the friend whose every sentence breathed the bitterness of a wasted life, and whose counsels were so fraught with spirit-depressing warnings.

“I wish the Rector would keep his homilies for the young brides of Hillingstone,” Percy would remark, when a more than usually gloomy epistle from her Mentor drew tears to the soft eyes of his betrothed, and reminded her lover that smiles were but ephemeral things.

“My poor grandfather!” was Rosamond’s

rejoinder, for, having no secrets from Percy, the latter had been long aware of the relationship between her and Santland. "My poor grandfather!" I often fancy that he sees cause for fear in my great happiness. He is for ever urging me to make the most of these most precious hours—this exceeding 'affluence of love and time'—for we are hanging on to the goal, he says, and for what? Only that, having attained and passed it by, we may look back upon the object of our life's ambition, and see its unadorned and dark reverse."

But the instants of calming reflection induced by the perusal of the Rector's letters were as drops in the ocean when compared with the rose-garlanded hours passed by the happy girl in the society of him who every hour grew more dear to her. She was not selfish, though, in her extreme felicity, for like the fair and good Evangeline, abnegation of self and devotion to others was the lesson which her life had taught her—and therefore she prayed that instead of the lengthened marriage-tour abroad, which had been originally planned, she and Percy should, after an absence of a fortnight, return to Hazel Combe, and there, watching over the last days of that desolate

and miserable old man, should strive to turn his thoughts to higher objects than the fleeting griefs of earth.

Percy never for a moment thought of combating this desire of Rosamond's. On the contrary (for were not all places with *her* alike to him ?) he would have gladly returned immediately after the wedding to beautiful Hazel Combe, and there have spent the lengthened honeymoon on which he so confidently reckoned.

The day appointed came at last, and a brilliant summer sun shone on the beautiful head encircled with its wreath of orange blossoms, which bent lowly before the altar where vows of love and faithfulness had just been spoken. It was a truly cheerful wedding—not a show one with fancifully-attired bridesmaids, and two or three white-robed ministers assisting at the ceremony—but a simple and a religious offering-up of vows—and a tearless parting between friends who were soon to meet again.

In a fortnight—true to their promise—the newly-married pair returned to the Combe, and entered upon what both rightly considered as a sacred duty.

The first sight of the Rector was sufficient to convince both Rosamond and her husband that

not for any lengthened period would that dismal duty last; for Santland had, during the short months which had elapsed since they had seen him, become rapidly weaker both in mind and body; and Dr. Crutchley, who watched him narrowly (although the Rector would never consent to place himself under medical care), did not attempt to hide from Rosamond that the old man's time on earth was short.

"The brain is softening," he said, "of that I have little doubt—but the immediate cause of death, which I believe may be a sudden one at last, will be a stoppage of the heart's action. He will not suffer bodily, I trust, but of mental torture our poor friend has, and will have, I suspect, a more than average share."

It was a painful task for Rosamond—but she performed it well and bravely—to listen to the wanderings of that poor troubled and tormented spirit. Bitter were often his self-accusations as he vaguely reverted to sins long since committed, and alas! not yet repented of—for, as the unhappy man would often mutter to himself, "*He* will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth."

His first awaking from sleep was the most trying moment of the day; and Rosamond (for

she had succeeded in removing the poor patient to the Combe) generally contrived to be by his bedside when the stifled cry of mental pain escaped his lips.

Then the man whose genius had been so utterly thrown away, and whose clinging to life was such a harrowing symptom in his mental disorder, would sometimes open out his heart to the loving watcher by his bed of pain.

He would dwell upon his early days of fierce temptation, and the great curse of violent passions he would plead as an excuse for every guilty yielding. Sometimes, too, he would reproach himself for the misfortunes which had fallen upon his best-beloved Bessie—alluding to the obstacles which had through *his* influence, been placed in the way of Johnnie Fendall's embracing the profession, which in his own case (as he frequently asserted) had been forced upon him by necessity.

It was in vain that Rosamond endeavoured to turn his thoughts towards the only unfailing source of comfort—in vain that she strove to breathe into his heart the impulse of a prayer—Saniland remained deaf and apparently hardened to her entreaties—given over, as she shudderingly feared, to a “reprobate mind,”

while his very dread of the awful and uncertain future was in itself a proof of that terrible "to come," in which he must render an account of his misdeeds, awaiting the unrepentant sinner.

Through all that weary time of sorrowful attendance, Rosamond was cheered and aided by him who never forgot that in *his* father's sore necessity, Santland had proved himself a friend indeed.

Percy never wearied in his offices of kindness. Love for his Rosamond, and gratitude towards the dying man of genius, caused "grief to fall like music from his tongue ;" and often the Rector was beguiled by Percy's eloquence into a frame of mind more hopeful for the future which loomed so dark and fathomless before him.

His end at last was, even as Dr. Crutchley had predicted, a sudden and apparently a painless one. About six weeks after Rosamond's return, he was found by his faithful grandchild (when she entered his bed-chamber to commence her daily duty), motionless and silent ! She took his hand in hers, but he could no longer feel the comfort of that mute caress, for the Rector of Combe Hatton had passed away

from things of earth, and had bidden adieu to this troubled world for ever !

They buried him by Bessie's side, and Rosamond shed many a bitter tear over his grave. To her was bequeathed the mournful duty of arranging the dead man's papers, and together did she and Percy read and wonder over the rich treasures of deep thought which that most miserable man had left behind him.

But for Percy's wise decree his grandchild would have given to the world the poet's songs, so that "Earth might inherit the rich melodies"—

"Hearing the voice when body there was none!"

"Better not," said Percy ; "better that the sparks of genius which only blazed up to betray should be forgotten in twilight and in silence. Better that the errors of one who might have been so great should be forgotten in the stillness of the tomb ; where—

"The fine-wrought eye and the wondrous ear
No longer live to see or to hear
All that is great and all that is strange
In the boundless realm of unending change."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

IN the earliest days of the ensuing month of August, and while lingering with her husband on the shores of the beautiful Lake of Zurich, Rosamond received from Hortense de Berny a letter, from which the following is an extract:—

“ We see a great deal of Mr. Shirly, for both grandpapa and dear grannie like him much, and it is pleasant to me to hear him talk of his father’s former friendship for Mr. Santland. I did not think a lawyer could be so agreeable ; I had fancied their hearts were made of parchment, and that their delight was rather in deeds than words. Mr. Shirly is not handsome, certainly, and he is *brusque* in his manner to men, showing his mental superiority sometimes too openly, but he is very gentle to women ; and, ungainly as is his appearance, there is something about him which represses

all inclination to ridicule. You ask me for news of Frederica, and I am happy to say that we all consider her greatly improved both in health and spirits. She speaks most affectionately both of you and Percy, and we are beginning to hope that the warmth of the friendship between **her and ancient Barbara** seems to be abating. Rica's vanity, too, now that she is no longer buoyed up by her brother's foolish flatteries, has subsided, and I trust soon to hail her as a worthy member of the sisterhood. But, Rosa, *ma chère*, every day's experience confirms me in the opinion that those women are the happiest whose brains are not encumbered by a superfluity of intellect, and whose hearts are unsusceptible of passion. A condition of decent debility is what we should covet for our daughters, and be contented with for ourselves. Myles Fendall is, as I firmly believe, heiress hunting; at least the world says so, and the world, take it altogether, is generally right. He is frequently to be seen riding in the Park with that very under-bred Miss Earnshaw, whose merits lie in her fifty thousand pounds. Prepare yourself, then, Rosamond, to receive a new cousin. It will not be agreeable, *mais, que voulez-vous?* *L'argent décrasse bien vite une*

famille, and Miss Earnshaw will be judged leniently, *vu les beaux yeux de sa cassette*. In the meanwhile, *ce cher* Myles is, by his own account, trying to obtain a small colonial government; in the which he will succeed, if pushing and intriguing have not lost their power to conquer. He adheres as closely as ever to his principle, that everything is to be attained through *our* influence; and only yesterday Laura received one of his amusing notes, in which, after dwelling on this favourite subject, he wound up with these lines—

‘Know well the *sex*, and put your trust in no man;
The proper (?) study of mankind is woman.’

Myles is very constant also to his little trade of scandal-mongering, repeating what Shirly calls the ‘echoes of the *weak*,’ and gaining grateful smiles from the greedy who crave after the hateful food.”

“And who,” broke in Percy, “gloat especially on the hoped-for errors of the frail and weak. Truly it behoves such to take heed to their ways, for ‘chiefs are amang them, taking notes, and faith, they’ll prent ‘em’ on the tablets of their memories, and publish them in the smoking-rooms of their clubs.”

"While," responded Rosamond, "slander travels at express speed, defence goes on foot and halts often by the way. But let me finish the letter, for the light is fading, and the ink which Hortense has used for her gay nothings is pale, and her French handwriting hard to read."

"I've been twice to see Aunt Mary at her farm," were the concluding words, "and once both Mr. Shirly and dear grannie were my companions. Myles is very often now at Broadlands, and the excellent old creature seems intensely proud of the *ney* whose seeking after her savings she is too honest-hearted to perceive. And take my word for it, Rosamond, that Colonel Myles *will* succeed in all that he undertakes; for our worthy cousin is one of those fortunate beings who, if I may be allowed to quote Aunt Mary's homely proverb, are *certain to fall on their legs.*"

And Myles Fendall *did* fulfil the joyous French girl's prophecy, for in process of time he married Henny Earnshaw, and went off in high spirits to act his Excellency on a small West Indian island.

Frederica Fendall, who had gradually been cured of her blind devotion to an intriguing

selfish man, "went in," to use Colonel Fendall's rather inelegant expression, for rank, bestowing her little hand, with the grace which was her chief characteristic, on Dandy Dick, who, by the death of Lord Westerham's dissipated son, had become heir presumptive to the title.

Several years have elapsed since those events took place, and Hortense de Berny is now the happy wife of Dr. Shirly's agreeable and intellectual son. The friendship between Mrs. Shirly and Rosamond is still as warm as at its earliest date ; nor is it rendered less fervent by the fact that their husbands (who are both in Parliament) are closely united by the bonds of congenial tastes and a similarity of political opinions.

Percy Elliot has, by Royal permission, assumed the name and arms of Fendall, and it is rumoured that ere long it will be announced in the "*Gazette*," that the old baronetage has been restored in the person of Sir Percy Fendall of Hazel Combe.

A happier wife and mother does not, throughout the length and breadth of the land, exist than Rosamond Fendall. As yet no shadow has fallen on the earthly heaven

where her lot is cast, and on her unclouded brow and well developed beauty can be read, even by those who run, the evidence of a heart untainted by the world.

And dearly still does Percy love the woman who, in evil report, stood by him nobly, and who throughout all time will, he feels assured, ever be the true unchanging friend—the wife to share his sorrows, and the mistress whose untiring love will gild with brighter colouring the evening of his life. To them the coming years can bring no withering change, for their devotion to each other depends not upon things that perish, but upon the beauty of heart and soul, which, taking new lustre from the touch of Time, shines on to the end with unextinguishable light !

THE END.

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